

Knight in Crimson Armor

by Micky pfc

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Summary: A different story, a different journey, a different kind of hero. The next generation of Spartans are heroic figures in shining armor to most, but not all. There are some who have known nothing else but war for a long, long time. The story of an unlikely hero, a soldier, a veteran, and a murderer. Introducing a new part of the Halo universe, merged with the official cannon.

1. Chapter One: Wake Up

My Head fucking kills.

I slowly emerge from the void, the enveloping darkness I recognize to be the veil of cryo-stasis. I've undergone this process countless times before in my military career, in wars against both insurrectionists and The Covenant, and over time I became accustomed to it, butâ€¦

Oh my god, my head is on fireâ€¦

But this time something has gone very, very wrong. As my head clears, I'm overwhelmed by blinding pain. Searing, mind-numbing pain in my head, unlike anything I've ever felt before.

Mind-numbing pain becomes my frontal and only focus. The only thing I feel, much less think, is skull-cracking pain.

But it's starting to let upâ€¦

From the merciless state of agony I emerge from my red mist. Up until now, I haven't had any sense of self-awareness, but nowâ€¦

Fuck, I can't breathe. Oh fuckâ€¦

I can remember that as part of the cryogenic "preservation process, they fill your lungs and pipes with an anti-freeze gel that

protects the lung cells from freezing. This process requires the subject to regurgitate the gel in order to breathe again, and I haven't yetâ€|

Oh god, I can't see.

Before, I was being blinded by the pain, but after only a brief period of sight I start to black out again.

Back into the void I go, eyes wide open but still unseeing. With the rest of my senses paralyzed, I feel my legs begin to give out from under me.

All I can do is think.

So I do.

What the hell was that about? Why did it feel like my head was being drilled open? That's never happened before, and I can usually take pain, as a veteran, my body has been broken in more ways than I'd care to count. Hell, I've taken bullets before, but it was never that bad.

It takes what feels like an eternity for me to hit the ground. In the split-second it takes for the floor to dig into my knees, I notice a few things:

I can still think, so I don't have brain damage.

This floor is grated; I can feel that at least.

_I must have fallen over the edge of my cryo-tube, 'cause that
__**hurt.**_

As I fall onto the floor on my hands and knees, my mouth forcefully jars open. I can't see, but I know what's coming next.

Wave after wave of foul-tasting gel comes up my windpipe. Just as I think I'm about to black out, I convulse for the last time, leaving my free to gasp all the air I want.

As I return from my oxygen â€" deprived state, so does my vision. As a soldier, my first and strongest impulse is to survey my surroundings.

I'm in a rectangular room, with just me, the pod, and a door on the far side. The ceiling, walls, and floor are all silver-grey, except for the dark metal grating. Upon further inspection, I see that there's a black sphere embedded in one of the walls, and a black box on the floor next to the pod I dropped out of. I guess the black sphere is a camera, used by an A.I to monitor my progress, but I have no idea what's in the box.

Then I remember I'm naked.

Well, I have a clue as to what might be in the box.

But right now, I'm not concerned with that. My body is in shock from whatever the hell _that _was. My arms and legs feel weak, like they did in my early days of basic training, and that was a _long _time

ago. I feel as if I've done so much in such little time, like I just ran a marathon. I'm exhausted. I can't even get up.

So I think.

What the hell was all that about? I thought I was having a stroke or something. I thought I was going to die. Even more confusing, since I'm sure I've become accustomed to cryo-stasis and it's after " affects, is that my head is buzzing again.

I can feel an episode coming on, like a mild headache at first. A low, throbbing headache growing in my head, quickly followed by my vision beginning to darken. I used to get blackouts before, just from age I guess, but this is ridiculous.

As the pain finally peaks, I feel it begin to settle, just as quickly as it came.

Maybe I am having a stroke

I need to find help.

* * *

><p>If you're reading this, then I'm sorry. I know there isn't much to this story right now, but I am still writing. I've tried writing before and never actually finished anything, but this time will be different, I promise. **I know it's cliché and narcissistic to write a story from first person present-tense, but I'm hoping to pull this off. I may have started too early, but I'm going to see this through, and I'm going to do this right. This story is my baby, and I'm going to see this through.**

2. Aftershocks

I open my present. Inside, I find clothes: Socks, boots, underwear, cargo pants, and a T-shirt " all jet black. I remember you can't wear any clothes going into cryo, or your skin burns off, or something. Once I'm fully dressed, I find my dog-tags at the bottom of the box. I put them on.

I stand up, feeling a little bit more whole now. These tags have been with me my entire military career, through countless theaters, and they've undoubtedly saved my life before. After all this time they've been severely scratched, dented, and even a little bit melted, but they're still mine, they're still me. You can even see the blood type.

I'm less concerned about the skull " cracking episodes I seem to be getting, than I am about getting thawed out. The spooks only put my boots on the line when they really need me.

This had better be important.

I decide to try to find whoever's running this joint, and I head for the door. But after only the first step I start to feel it again. It starts from the deepest part in the back of my skull, sending waves of hot pain to the front of my face. It's a lot worse than the headaches I used to get. I can tell I'm in trouble when it doesn't

stop, the intensity just dissipates, but it doesn't go away.

I need to find help.

I try and focus on getting to the door. Maybe I'll find help, someone, somewhere out there. Maybe whoever's running this show will have sent a doctor by now, or at least I hope they have. But then again, maybe they weren't expecting this. I sure as hell wasn't.

It takes what feels like forever, but I stumble my way to the door, squinting my pained eyes. Against the most unbearable pain I can imagine, I key the unlocked door to open, and look around outside. The door has the average opening protocol; a 9-digit keypad below a light that either shows green or red, and you tap the green to open the door. I silently thank my lucky stars I'm not locked in, since I need help, and I wouldn't know the combination anyways.

_ Jesus Christ, my head._

Through the blinding pain, I discern that I'm in a dark, metallicâ€"grey hallway. I can tell I'm on some UNSC ship, when I compare the scenery to the ships I've been on before. Din, grey, colorless, cold, metallic, and generic, devoid of any signs of life . I can't believe the navy spends their careers like this, trapped in a big metal box for months.

The pain lets up a little bit, and I'm allowed to open my eyes a little wider. I can see that the door on the left end of the hallways is locked and showing red, but the one on the right is shut but unlocked, and showing green.

Under a haze, I shamle my way over to the door on the right, farther away than the other one. Every step feels like a baseball bat strike to the back of my skull. When I get to the end, I'm about to open the door, when something catches my eye.

To my right I see a kiosk, typical of UNSC ships to have in their hallways. They usually have a touch â€" type interface, with a keyboard for things like search functions, bringing up maps, displays, schematics, things like that. But this one looks different, altered in some way. The words "Touch To Start" in white, blink on and off against a light blue background, under the UNSC logoâ€|

But this one is different...

The eagle seems fatter, uglier, and there's a strange looking shield under it with two dots on either side. What the hell? The symbol changed? How long have I been away?

I choose to study the screen for a while longerâ€| Untilâ€| _Shit_. I feel light headed, my vision darkens, and I get a quiet buzzing in my ear. I blink my eyes in confusion, until I see the word "Infinity" on the screen.

What the hell is that supposed to mean? Oh Christâ€|

The buzzing becomes an intense ringing, another headache must be coming on. I feel dizzyâ€|

No. Piss off. What does Infinity mean? What the hell?

I stubbornly stare at the screen, and the storm of a migraine in my head grows with every second. But that doesn't make any sense; I don't have a history of epilepsy.

The pain grows to a _ridiculous_ point, and that's when I realize:

Staring at the screen _is_ what's causing this. When I really think about it, the moment I laid eyes on the bright-blue light, I was getting a ringing in my ears.

Now the pain is truly unbearable, the worst it's been yet. The ringing had let up a little while ago, but now it's back, and louder than ever. It's so intense I stumble back a little, away from the kiosk, leaning with my back against the opposite wall. I groan in pain and hold my eyes, like I did when I used to get sinus headaches. It feels like they're going to pop. I want to claw them out with my nails, if it might make the pain stop.

I open my eyes for a second, andâ€¦|

What the fuck?

I'm looking at the kiosk, and that stupid fucking symbol, but everything looks different. The image looks like it's been stained a dirty orange. In fact, my whole vision is like that, and still blurred, not helped by the constant, blinding pain. I blink again, but it doesn't change, the white parts are still stained orange, and blurred. The ringing becomes louder, and my head begins burning even more so.

I hold my hands against my eyesâ€¦| They feel warmâ€¦|

I draw my hands back and look at themâ€¦|

Fuckâ€¦|

My hands are stained with streaks of crimson. Even under this haze, I can tell it's blood. I can feel it in thin streaks painting my face.

My ears buzz, and I feel blood in them too.

Next, my sinuses get hot, and I feel a nose-bleed coming on. Fuck. Fuck. Fuckâ€¦|

I recoil, holding my face in my hands, as I blink my vision becomes more tinted in orange.

Until it all turns red.

Not waiting another second, I slap the green pad on the door with a bloody hand, and it hisses open, although it sounds muffled to me. I rub and wipe my eyes as the two halves of the door slide into the bulkhead, glaring a mix of red and green. Holy flying fuck, I think I'm about to black out.

But as I look into the hallway beyond the threshold, I see four figures dressed in white, each on one corner of a stretcher they

carry between them. They look like civilian paramedics, not corpsmen. They must be here for me.

My vision is still tinted, but I can see the expressions on their faces. I can't imagine what I must look like to them.

Blood drips off my face. I raise my shaking hands, as my head begins to pound and burn. My ears ring so loud I go deaf. I feel weak, as if I'm about to pass out.

Then I taste the tinge of copper in the back of my mouth.

"Pleaseâ€¦ Help meâ€¦" Is all I can manage to get out, before my knees give out from under me.

The two medics closest to me catch me, supporting my as they haul me onto the stretcher. All I can do is keep pleading, "Pleaseâ€¦ Help meâ€¦"

As I lie on the stretcher, and I see the lights speed over me as I'm taken down the seemingly infinite hallway, a reassuring voice tells me; "Just hold on, you're gonna be alright."

And I black out.

* * *

><p>I: Go for secure.<p>

I: â€¦

I: Go ahead.

O: Well, what seems to be the problem?

I: It's him. We have a situation.

O: We expected some complications to arise.

I: We weren't expecting this.

O: You were warned.

I: Not about this. He's bleeding from the eyes for Christ's sake.

O: An unfortunate outcome. But we were anticipating that.

I: Really?

O: Really.

I: So what's the plan?

O: We prevent him from dying a horrible, painful, gruesome death.

I: We have him in the infirmary right now. He's stable, but we don't know what to do. We don't know how to save him.

O: We have plans for these kinds of things.

I: Is this your _take care of your own_ policy?

O: Not exactly, but we have specialists who can perform surgery on him.

I: Another one?

O: This one will fix him.

I: Alright.

O: We have two outstandingly talented individuals we can send.

I: Option A?

O: _Her_.

I: I thought she was a different kind of doctor.

O: She's also a neurobiologist.

I: What are her credentials?

O: She created Cortana.

I: I think we'll go with the other one. Thanks.

O: Okay, well, he has an education in neurobiology, as well as a specialization in this exact case.

I: Sounds good. When can we meet?

O: He's on his way.

3. Slowly Dying

It feels like a fever dream, lying on my back, struggling to breathe, burning up like Alessa in Silent Hill. I'm short of breath, my joints and muscles ache, and I toss and turn on my back, thrashing my arms, waving them in the air like a drowning man. It's hard to tell what I'm actually doing, and what I just falsely perceive myself doing. I might not be waving my arms at all, maybe I'm just epileptically writhing in a pool of my own blood. Maybe I'm already dead, and I don't know it yet.

The steady, rhythmic beep of a heart monitor clings to my mind as I slip in and out of consciousness. I'm not dead, but it's hard to tell what I'm seeing in my waking moments, and what my splintering mind conjures during my fits of unconsciousness. I catch short glimpses of my surroundings; men in white medical scrubs, rushing around a room filled with medical equipment against the far wall in front of me. I think I'm still on the stretcher.

I struggle to remain awake against whatever they have in the I.V drip to my left, trickling a clear liquid into straight into my veins. I try to push my way to the surface whenâ€¦|

Oh fuck, not again.

I can feel it coming on, as a blinding pain starts in my head. It feels like someone is stabbing me in the back of the skull, as well as my back, chest, and shoulders. Like someone's pounding nails into my eyes. It hurts so much I scream, I have to. I feel like I'm in hell. I can't help but thrash and scream in pain, until I feel a firm hand on my right shoulder.

I look up, into the face of a woman standing over me. I notice her piercing eyes and drawn back hair, among her other distinct facial features.

"Hey, relaxâ€¦" She tells me, in the tone a sergeant addresses a rookie.

"What?!" I demand, cutting her off. "Who are you?! Where-" But that's all I can get out before the taste of copper in my mouth chokes me. Blood pools in the back of my mouth, thick and metallic, making it hard for me to breathe. I gag and wretch, violently spitting it out onto the floor. Drowning in my own blood? I don't plan on dying like this.

"Calm down, you're gonna be fine. Listen, my name is Sarah Palmer, and we're doing everything we can here toâ€¦"

That's the last thing I hear her say before my head begins to spin and ache. My ears ring so loud I go deaf. It hurts so bad I go blind.

I scream before I black out.

When I come back, I'm still in the room, still on the stretcher, with Palmer still there next to me, but this time something is wrong. When I look at her face, her eyes are a bit wider, a bit more concerned. When I look around the room, the people in white look stunned, and a little bit scared. Everyone's staring at me.

"Micky," Palmer again, leaning on the side of the stretcher rail, looking at me, "do you know what's happening?" She asks. She knows my name. The grim look on her face tells me something is very, very wrong.

"Iâ€¦ I can't feel my legs," I get out, before I'm choked again. My eyes leak and fill with blood in their sockets, my ears too.

Palmer wipes the blood from my eyes. "Okay Micky, we're doing everything we can to keep you alive right now, but you need to tell us what's going on."

All I can do is groan; "It hurts," through grit teeth.

And I black out.

* * *

><p>Spartan Commander Sarah Palmer walked down the hall, through the large sliding door, and onto the bridge of Infinity. Lasky was waiting at the holotable, stubbornly staring into the display with determination. She could see it on his face and in his eyes. She knew that meant something was wrong.

The captain had sent her to the infirmary to visit the dying man; their new addition to _Infinity_. He was supposed to be a great rifleman, beyond Special Forces, so good that ONI would only deploy him in special situations.

What she had seen of him wasn't what she expected.

"Commander Palmer," Lasky addressed her, "how's the patient?"

"Dying." She replied.

"I understand," he told her, "they're sending someone to operate on him. He'll be fine."

"He didn't look 'fine' to me," She told him, "he looked like he was dying."

"He'll be fine." Lasky reassured her.

As their eyes met, she saw the grim look on his face; the look they had exchanged countless times in this very room. A look she'd come to recognize well, during their command under Del Rio, before Lasky was Captain.

She had entered the room where the man they enigmatically referred to as "Micky" and "The Rifleman" was being held, expecting him to be ready for duty, not delirious and covered in his own blood. He wore all black, but his face was stained and streaked with blood around his eyes. It was all over his shirt and pants too, not to mention his hands.

As he tossed and turned, she tried to comfort the dying man, like she had done countless time with other soldiers. An act of sympathy from one soldier to another, but it only seemed to make him afraid. Then again, as a veteran, he could probably tell that meant he wasn't doing well.

As the heart monitor displayed that he had flatlined, and let out the familiar ring she knew all too well, she reluctantly expected his body to go limp, dead.

Instead, to her surprise, he arched his back and screamed in pain.

What she heard, what he sounded like, didn't sound like a person. His screams were horrible, the worst she had ever heard, louder than any dying man she had every heard before, so loud it was the only thing anyone in the room could hear. He must have been a drill sergeant at some point.

His body went limp as the horrible screaming ended. Blood was leaking from his ears, and pooling in his eyes, not to mention trickling from the corner of his mouth. He bled profusely all over the floor.

But to her surprise, his heart began beating again. The heart monitor resumed its rhythmic beeping, as if nothing had even happened. She couldn't believe her eyes as he stirred, like he was waking up from a nightmare. He looked around, gathering his bearings, until his eyes met hers. They were so red and bloodshot, unbelievable.

She wiped the blood out of his eyes with her fingers, even though she wasn't wearing white gloves. It didn't bother her, she didn't care; she knew that, as a veteran, that's what you do for a dying soldier. It had been a long time since Private Sarah Palmer had learned that lesson. In all that time she'd become as the first Sergeant to teach her, God rest the old bastard's soul. Better at times.

She wiped the blood off on her cargos, and tried talking to Micky again. But every time he spoke he'd be cut off by his own blood in his mouth. He'd make a sick choking sound and more trickled from his mouth. She tried helping him " unlike the medical staff, who seemed more interested in buzzing around their machines than tending to the dying soldier on life support in the room with them, choking on his own blood.

She didn't get very far.

When she asked him if he knew what was going on, he screamed again. This time it was even louder, the most horrible scream she'd ever heard. He was deafening, she guessed he could yell louder than any officer she'd heard before, but there was something off-putting about his screams. Too guttural, too inhuman, she couldn't guess the kind of pain he was in.

He had one hell of a set of lungs, because the screaming went on for what felt like an eternity, it sure got everyone's attention.

Just when she thought it couldn't get any worse, his body shuddered and wretched violently from his arched posture, like a giant invisible hand had gripped him and snapped his spine. Blood spurted from his mouth, and some from his ears and nose. His body went limp as the heart monitor rang out, telling that his heart had stopped. That was when then medical staff took him out of the room, presumably to emergency surgery.

Captain Lasky stared at her as she told him. He looked concerned.

"We've got someone who can operate on him. Came this morning. ONI guy, knows what he's doing. They say he's gonna make it." He assured her.

"And if he doesn't?" She asked. Not exactly concerned, but Micky came with high recommendations, and if he didn't make it, they'd need a replacement.

Tom gave her his yeah-I-know look, and reassured her, "He'll be fine."

She thought about it for a while. That was something Tom seemed to say a lot, usually it was we'll be fine. She knew he had to be the one to reassure them both when things were bad, but she had to wonder how confident he was that they really would make it through this next assignment.

And even then, she didn't know if she wanted Micky around anyways. She already had a crew, a reliable network of people she knew, people she trusted. They'd been through it all- seen all the horrors the galaxy could throw at them, together, and come out the other side as

weathered veterans. But now she was expected to get along with the new guy? In all her memory she'd never thought the FNG was a good addition. Micky was _not_ her friend, just some new guy that got thrown in the same boat.

Sure, she had been a replacement once, but this was different. All people had a certain composition of traits and characteristics that made up their personality, like chemicals. Depending on what kind of a person you were, you could be compatible with some people, reasonably or instantly, or simply inherently unable to get along. You'd never know until you met them. The new guy could be volatile; mixing him with her people might not be a good idea. If he didn't get along with them, it would be like a chemical reactionâ€¦

Put the wrong people together, and jeez... Hit the deck.

As Sarah returned to her bunk, she found herself thinking about her time in one of her old outfits, and the time they got replacements. Except that time the FNG ended up being her platoon leader.

_Well, it won't be that bad. _She thought. _He'll listen to me. He has to._

* * *

><p>Did anyone read those Splinter Cell books written by Raymond Benson? If you have, then you'll know what I'm going for. If you haven't, then you totally should. And YES, in the future, Silent Hill with still be a thing!

**Anyways, yes, the cast of Halo 4 is in this. I understand it might be cringe worthy if I try to write these characters, but I'm hoping I can do a good enough job to make it presentable, if not enjoyable.
**

4. Back In The Game

Captain Thomas Lasky stood on the bridge of _Infinity_ as the many members of his bridge crew buzzed and sped around him in all directions. Though it was _his_ ship, and _his_ recent promotion to Captain, he still worried. He worried about his new responsibility as captain of a ship the size of a city, his responsibility for over 10,000 souls, and the hope of the fleet. The eyes of the navy, and indeed the citizens of the UNSC would be looking to _Infinity_ to protect them, and to lead the fleet to victory. Lasky was definitely under pressure. Sometimes he doubted his own ability as an officer of the UNSC navy.

But Parangosky believed in me.

Thomas reached into his pocket for comfort, and found it. He withdrew his hand, clutching his totems.

A black stone, and a pair of dog tags.

He'd kept them all these years, nearly thirty, since the war started. Since _his_ war started.

The dog tags hung from the canopy in his days as a fighter pilot,

like a picture of a man's wife. And he always kept the stone. He kept them to remember. How could he ever forget? How could he ever allow himself to forget?

I've been an officer long enough to know how to be a captain. Hell, I went to CAMS.

That was where his war started: Corbulo Academy of Military Science. That was where he lost _her._ Where he lost them all in a single night. Where he first laid eyes on a Spartan.

He held the stone in one hand, black like obsidian. It was smooth like any stone taken from a river bed, but turn it over and it was rough and porous. The other side of the stone was jagged, dotted with holes like a lunar landscape. In truth, it wasn't really a stone at all, but a piece of alien armor. Lasky had taken it the same night he took the dog tags. A night he'd promised he would never forget.

That was one of the reasons he had kept the totems. Not just for good luck, but to remind him what he was fighting for. What they were all fighting for. What so many of Thomas' friends had _died _for.

But I'm here now. I made it longer than Del Ro. I made it longer than all of them. I'm alive, I'm here now, and I can do this. I can. I know I can

"Captain?"

Thomas was unexpectedly ripped from his thoughts, back onto the bridge of _Infinity._ He'd almost forgotten that Commander Palmer was standing next to him. He'd forgotten that his lieutenants needed his direction.

Thomas recognized the new and unfamiliar voice. A man's voice. The voice of a stranger, and yet somehow so easily recognizable that Thomas already knew whose it was, just from that one word. "What is it, Cruz?" He asked, and turned to the closest corner of the holotable, where a misty, ghostly apparition stood patiently on the surface of the projector.

Cruz, placeholder AI to the _Infinity_. He took the form of a ghost, the silhouette of a man, but faceless, entirely featureless and colorless. He chose the color grey, though not pure grey, the projector couldn't do that, there was a slight, almost imperceptible bluish tinge to it. The color of the sky on an overcast day. Sometimes he appeared to them as nothing more than a wisp of smoke, sometimes he took the outline of a man, light grey around the edges, slightly darker, more concentrated on the inside. He always appeared to roil and warp like steam or smoke, as if he was just a cloud of fog being held together in the shape of a man.

Thomas was onboard when _Infinity_ had crashed onto the "surface" of Requiem, killing their previous onboard AI, _instantaneously_. Thomas was only the executive officer to Del Rio then, but he had seen that happen with other, human pilots before. It was definitely _not_ a good way to go. Thomas didn't know the other AI well, an unspoken, self-contained stranger to him and the others, but he still felt a loss for the poor soul. Cruz, though, Captain Lasky appreciated him a lot. He was polite, respectful, and a hard worker. He didn't talk much, and when he did he was very soft-spoken and quiet, and he

always kept it short. He was more concerned with his job, and he never rested until the job was done. His focus and silent determination was unmatched by any of Captain Lasky's bridge crew.

Of course, Cruz seemed like a pushover, but he had experience on his side. He may have been on the wrong side of 5, and AIs only lived to 7 anyways, but he was still an invaluable asset. He'd served on the Earth's orbital defense grid in 2552. He'd never abandoned ship.

"The new guy's on his way, looks ready for his tour." Cruz informed them both. "I've sent the route to your datapads. You can access the camera feeds any time you want."

"Thank you, Cruz." Thomas said, and picked up his tablet from the table edge. The Commander didn't say anything, just furiously tapped at the touch screen, writing something. Thomas expected the vaporous, spectral avatar to disappear from the holotable, but he persisted.

"Um, sir?"

"What?" He asked, knowing that this had to have been important. He'd gotten to understand Cruz's manner well enough by now. He was always quietly polite and formal, a good guy all around, and he only spent extra time on items that were of any real importance. Commander Palmer knew it too, she stopped and looked up from her mobile.

When he was sure he had both their attention, Cruz continued. "When he comes in here, I think you better take a look at his right leg. He seems to be limping."

"Understood Cruz, dismissed." This time, Cruz's avatar really did disappear, dissipating in a smoky end, with the almost inaudible sound of wind blowing through a window. The signature sign of his withdrawal from whatever station he'd formally been at, a bit like a candle being blown out.

"A limp? I thought he was ready." Thomas asked Commander Palmer. To him she was "Sarah." After all they had been through together; the raid on Infinity, the Halo installations, Requiem, Del Rio, they called each other by their first names. Of course, every now and then they remembered the formalities.

"So did I." She replied, turning to him just as the door to the bridge opened.

New guy's here.

Captain Lasky hadn't had a chance to get to know their new arrival after he was taken out of cryo-stasis, and began uncontrollably hemorrhaging to death. This was his first chance to connect with the man on a personal level. Of course, ONI had sent him their report: his history, military record, psyche evaluation, even Admiral Parangosky's write-up. Much of it was classified, very much so. Lines upon lines of black ink covered the papers - a rare commodity - taking up most of what scarce records the ONI censors allowed Tom to see at all. Other files were stored on a digital platform, but again, the majority was withheld from him. What little detail ONI had gracefully allowed Tom to know was enough for him to feel familiar

enough with Micky that he wouldn't feel estranged in person, but he wasn't expecting the new guy to look likeâ€¦ _This_.

The first thing Thomas noticed about the man was how tall he was. Not so tall as to be intimidating, but he was still pretty tall. He was one of the few men tall enough to look Commander Palmer in the eyes. Tom was beginning to feel overshadowed on his own bridge.

The man looked like he was much younger than Tom, like he was either in his late twenties or early thirties. To Captain Lasky it seemed impossible that someone with a reputation like his could possibly be so _young_. But upon closer inspection, Tom saw he did seem to have some grey streaks along the front of his hair lineâ€¦

No, not grey, whiteâ€¦ Interesting.

He had a normal civilian hairstyle, not the standard military buzz cut, but he was clean-cut. No tattoos or piercings either. At least that was something. Not only was he young, he was also very slim. Not scrawny or sickly thin, but he had a lean athletic profile. Arms and legs that were only slightly longer than usual. Tom noticed he really did walk with a hitch in his right.

"Good morning, Micky, I'm Captain Lasky, you've already met Commander Palmer. Welcome aboard _Infinity_." Tom greeted him, not exactly sure what time it was, but he wanted to be the one to make the introduction. Micky and Commander Palmer exchanged an awkward nod of the head. He self-consciously ran a finger under his left eye. "Are you coming from the infirmary?"

"Yeah." The man replied, and saluted. His voice was deep and low, and his salute was with perfect form. He wore the black uniform of an intelligence officer, matched by his sleek, jet-black hair. Tom and Sarah returned their salutes, giving him their permission to stand _at ease_.

As he did so, Tom spoke up. "Is there something wrong with your leg, Micky? You sure you don't need to go back?"

"It happens fromâ€¦ temperature change. Justâ€¦ temperature change, that's allâ€¦ It's nothing, it won't be a problemâ€¦ Sir." The man said. His speech sounded extremely labored, as if the words themselves were hard to say. Tom couldn't exactly say, not for sure, but it was as if the man was ashamed to admit he walked with a limp.

It wasn't until the man addressed him as "sir" that Tom realized that he hadn't before. He didn't exactly look like the type to be insubordinate, but something about him just lookedâ€¦ _Heavy_.

"I hope not." Tom replied, forging ahead. "If you're ready, we can go ahead with the orientation."

"Yeah." Said Micky, his expression utterly blank.

There it was again. _Yeah_. Something you just didn't say to an officer. It was informal, unacceptable, and just plain rude. In the military you said _yes sir_, _yes ma'am_, or just _aye aye, Captain_.

"Don't you remember how to address your commanding officers?" Commander Palmer spoke up. She'd noticed too, now she planned to grill him. She looked cross, Tom almost felt sorry for anyone who had to take a shelling from the Spartanâ€¦| _Almost_.

But Micky didn't move, he didn't speak, he didn't react at all. His expression didn't change from the dark, serious, brooding look he always seemed to wear, like the miseryguts Tom had heard he was. Instead, he simply stood there, staring. At what, neither Tom nor Sarah could tell. In a heartbeat, he went from his _at_ _ease_ _stance_, to leaning on the holotable with both hands. The light from the projection cast him in a ghostly blue tint. His already dark brown eyes seemed to darken further, along with the rest of his expression.

In the light of the hologram, he suddenly didn't look so young any more. He had scars. Many, _many_ scars on his face. Long scars on his jaw line left from helmet straps, and a large checkmark-shaped scar on the left side. A long, thin scar ran down the center of his lips, dividing his facial features. On his left: ragged, angular rips and cuts covered most of his bottom lip. On his right: a thin, pale scar forked and curved from a section of his lower lip, down and to the right. On the right side of his chin he had yet another curved scar. He didn't look too gruesome, but in truth he did look a little bit menacing.

"No disrespect to either of you, but I thought I outranked you both." He said, completely serious. Tom could swear his accent changed. Before, he had spoken with the United States midwestern nonaccent. But for that disrespectful little bout, he went somewhere between Boston and New York. Before that, even, Tom could swear he almost sounded like a Texan trying to suppress his drawl.

"I'm sorry, there's clearly been a misunderstanding." Tom intervened before the situation escalated any further. He knew Sarah had her sidearm on her. In truth, he had half expected Micky to say something like that after he read the report sent from Admiral Osman. ONI had warned him that Micky's could sometimes fly off the handle. Parangosky knew, she knew him exceptionally well, better than anyone else. Her write-up had said that he could act up at times, but that he was also an invaluable asset to the UNSC, and established that some leniencies would have to be taken with him. "_Reasonable, but generous,_" she had said. She spoke of him almost like he was an old friend of hers. His rank and experience made him indispensable to ONI, and that meant they were stuck with him for now, whether any of them liked it or not. ONI had spoken.

"You know what else I think? I don't think either of you know what or who you're dealing with. I don't think you're capable, or even ready to requisition my services."

If she didn't before, Sarah definitely had her hand on her holster now. Tom knew he had to calm things down before they got out of control. Of the two of them, she definitely played the bad cop.

"I know you have a lot of catching up to, and we're going to get this cleared up, but we expect your full cooperation for as long as you're going to be with us. Admiral Osman sent you here, along with recommendations from Admiral Parangosky, and we're all expecting you to perform loyally. Otherwise, you'll have to explain yourself

directly to Admiral Osman, understand?"

Micky became deathly silent for a change. He was almost impossible to read, his scarred facial features completely cold and expressionless. But after what seemed to be much internal bargaining, he straightened up, and replied. "Yes sir. Sorry Captain. Sorry Commander."

Tom turned to Sarah as a very smug grin almost cracked over their faces, before he returned his attention to Micky. "Very well, I suppose now we can get along with the orientation." He said, and began running a program on the holotable.

ONI had informed Captain Lasky that he would need to go through this process if they were to be in command of Micky's service. For ONI operatives who spent as much time in cryo-stasis as he did, whenever they were brought into service they required an orientation. Time apparently meant very little to them. Thomas had heard that some of them were preserved for decades until they were needed. Micky truly was a man out of time, cryogenically preserved to keep him young and sharp until ONI decided to deploy him.

Naturally, Micky was put through a very basic test before he came to the bridge. Simple questions everyone involved knew he could answer: What's your name? When were you born? What color is your hair? Your eyes? How many scars do you have?

Micky had answered the questions easily, proving his mental health satisfactory to the ONI handlers that had come with him, who then rewarded him with the basic information he needed. But the more detailed orientation that he needed was due next, and ONI had granted the honors to Captain Lasky and Commander Palmer. The guy had a lot of catching up to do if the last time he was awake was 2552.

"Let's get this over with." Commander Palmer said to Tom. He could tell she was unhappy.

"Alright," Tom agreed, and brought up the first part of the presentation: a 3D holographic projection of Infinity, "first thing's first; the year is 2557, and the war with The Covenant is officially over. We've rebuilt some of the inner colonies, but there have still been reports of violent uprisings among the civilian population. You've fought the insurrection before, correct?"

"Yes sir," Micky replied, sensing Tom's opening to starting some small talk. "I remember fighting the insurrectionists. I've been around for a while, sir, and I'm can do it again."

Tom remembered too. "Don't worry, they're not your concern." He continued with the presentation, changing the holographic projection to a collection of images of varying Covenant soldiers, taken in a variety of different locations, each from a different angle. Unggoy, Kig-Yar, Sangheili, even one of a brute.

Tom remembered his time on the bridge when Infinity bombarded the planet Sanghelios. That was something to remember. It had been a good display of what Infinity was capable of, as well as her enormous strength, size, and daring courage. But above all: They had sent a message, and that was what really mattered. Infinity was change, a sign of the UNSC's power. Forgive your enemies, but never, ever, forget their names.

"The Covenant has broken up since you were last around. As far as we know; their hierarchal society has dissolved since their prophets went into hiding. The only fighting forces that are still giving us trouble are the scattered remnants of their military, though their combat structure and tactics are still largely the same. It's mostly former Sangheili officers that are in command now."

"Uh, _Sangheili_? Do you mean-" Micky began to ask.

"The Hinge-heads." Commander Palmer cut him off. Tom had never known or thought much about the enemy, he'd only ever referred to them as "elites". Now, since the human race was no longer officially at war with them, the proper term to use was "Sangheili." A strange new development for both sides, after nearly 30 years of being at each other's throats, but time moved on.

Tom noticed Micky had a strange look on his face, yet another unidentifiable expression that almost looked like confusion. Tom dismissed it, and continued on the subject of The Covenant.

"The largest and most problematic of the known Covenant remnants is the one you've been brought on to help with. Intel is pretty rough, but you'll be given what we know so farâ€¦"

Commander Palmer handed Micky a small mobile device the size of a civilian chatter, smaller than the tablets she and Tom had. "You can get everything you need to know on this." She said, and he slipped the device into his pocket. She still looked cross with him.

Tom continued with the next part. "As you may already know, the threat of the Halo array was eliminated years ago, soon after you went into cryo, but it seems the Forerunners still have some tricks up their sleeve. Our mission since _Infinity_ was completed has been to find and decommission the other ringworlds, until we dug up a lead on this placeâ€¦"

Tom changed the display to an image of a large, pale blue sphere.

"Requiem." Tom declared. "We knew the Forerunners were able to create entire worlds, like the Halos, but this is different. It's more like an inside-out planet, instead of a ring. A Dyson sphere. On Requiem, we encountered a new type of enemy, one we've never seen before. They're Forerunner constructs, but we'll explain that to you another time."

"I've fought Forerunner constructs before. I know how to kill them."

"Good to know, but that's not what's important right now."

Commander Palmer shifted posture beside Tom. From what they'd read about Micky from Parangosky, he was _not_ going to like this part. Tom and Sarah hadn't liked Micky before, but it he was about to get much, much worse.

"Which brings us to the matter at hand..." Tom started. "As you're already aware, you're onboard the UNSC _Infinity_, the largest starship in human history." Micky nodded, following along with Tom as

he spoke. He'd seemed to have lightened up a bit, though that would quickly change. "You'll get a briefing on all that too, but it ties in-

"You sound like you've been avoiding something, I can tell. Just come on and say it already." He cut Tom off. Impatient and short-tempered, just as Tom had imagined him. Predictable. No one bothered getting angry at Micky this time.

"While you were away, the Spartan program has advanced with the latest advancements in technology. The fourth generation is now in full swing, as its own branch in the UNSC. However, what sets this program apart from the previous generations is that the subjects are experienced UNSC personnel selected from other military branches."

With Micky being ONI, he already knew all the horrible, classified details of the Spartan "II" program. A long serving agent, Parangosky had said that Micky had been in on it when it happened. The chemical enhancements, the risky surgeries, the deadly injections Doctor Catherine Halsey had implemented. She didn't reveal much, but Tom suspected that he may have even participated in a deniable part of the scandal.

"Only the most skilled and adept soldiers can become Spartans, but those that make it become the very best the UNSC has. ONI has seen fit to deploy you under our command, but not only that, Admiral Osman herself has given you the opportunity of a lifetime. You've been chosen to become a Spartan four."

There was a pause. Another very long, awkward silence where Micky didn't say anything. His eyes seemed to grow with shock or anger, though he didn't speak. After that, he seemed to grow either suspicious, resentful, or furious.

"Come again?" He asked, either outraged or confused. "You want to make me a Spartan?"

"Not us, ONI." Commander Palmer corrected him. "You're cutting the line, you should to be grateful. They don't let just anyone become a Spartan, you know. You have to earn it."

"Well, I'm just fine the way I am, thanks." Micky protested. "You don't need to try making me into a Spartan, thank you very much, I'm just fine."

"It's not us, it's Admiral Osman who gave you this assignment." Tom corrected him with a sense of finality. "If you want someone to talk to about this, I'm sure you won't hesitate to contact her."

Tom paced around to the other side of the table, and gestured towards the door. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we're on a bit of a time schedule here. Commander Palmer has generously volunteered to give you a tour of Infinity. I suggest you get to know each other, she's going to be your commanding officer. Your assignment starts immediately after your tour."

"Fine, let's get this over with." Micky grumbled to himself almost inaudibly.

Commander Palmer swiftly grabbed her datapad from the table, and walked off the bridge with an impatient "follow me." Tom saw her shoot him a very resentful look as she passed him on the way out. Micky trailed after her, still slightly limping, before they both disappeared into the halls.

Tom was once again left alone with his thoughts.

"Wow." Commented Cruz's ghost, uncharacteristically opinionated, a sign of just how unbelievable Micky was. His avatar returned to his usual spot on the holo-table. "He's a real piece of work, huh?"

Tom definitely agreed. This was the agent ONI had blessed them with? The one Admiral Parangosky thought of as her personal angel of death? Tom had never cared much for formality, and he could admit to himself that most folks who'd served under him thought of him as a very down â€" to â€" Earth kind of guyâ€|. But Micky was just plain rude. Reading about him was one thing, but he was even worse in person.

And they were putting Tom in charge of this guy?

"Cruz?" He called, with renewed purpose. "Get Admiral Osman on the line. We need to talk."

* * *

><p>We got the blood cleaned up a while ago, though the taste of copper still lingers in the back of my mouth. My limp is acting up again, too. The muscles on the back of my knee pull every now and then, but I'm well used to it by now. I've had this damn limp for a while now, years in fact. It gets a little frustrating at times, but it's a good reminder of how damn careless I was. I was too damn young, and too damn careless.<p>

They told me what I should avoid while I'm on the mend; heavy lifting and drinking, mostly. I told them I know how it works. This wasn't the first time they cut open. I didn't really listen, it's nothing I can't handle. Didn't even bother remembering that AI's name.

I have no fucking idea when I'm going to be at 100% again. My head still hurts, like a mild headache a times, sometimes I get a migraine, and sometimes it's a full-on episode. Sometimes I bleed, sometimes I don't. They told me I should be better soon, and that I'll feel better with time, but I'm not a very patient man. I can't remember a time when my ears haven't been ringing. It doesn't bother me anymore, but I'd appreciate some real silence for once in my life.

"Soâ€| What's with the hair?" Commander Palmer asks, finally breaking from her silence. She absolutely fucking loathes me, I can tell from the look on her face. Her tone isn't too happy, either. Stone cold and resentful, every word she says is pointed, sharpened like a weapon aimed at me. I catch her glaring at me out of the corner of my eye to my right as I walk beside her. It's a long way to walk, this damn ship is as big as a city, or so they say. This tour is going to take a while.

"Genetic throwback," I explain, looking up self-consciously at the white streaks at the front of my hairline, "it kind of justâ€|

happened. I guess it's in my genes."

I'm a little surprised she didn't notice the hair before. It's not something people usually miss when they meet me. Though on second thought, it was probably because the first time she saw me, I looked like I'd been in a car accident. Thank god that's over. They told me I had surgery, whatever the hell kind of surgery it could have been, no one's told me anything about it. All I know is that when I woke up, I was surrounded by ONI agents, and I had to listen to some oversized prick in a black uniform bossing me around like he owned me. Not to mention that after I was done talking to the AI, I was basically on a leash from then, until I got to the bridge. I don't know much, but I do know that they're ONI enforcers, they all carry humblers on them at all times, and they made it perfectly clear they they'll hit me with them if they think I'm getting out of line.

There used to be a time when I'd have been their boss. But not today.

I risk a glance over my shoulder. "Hey, don't look now but I think we're being followed." I say jokingly. I'm not completely sure how many, but somewhere between 6 and 9 of the two dozen ONI enforcers onboard are following behind us from a safe distance. They probably thought they were being discreet, though they were obviously wrong. They all look at me like they hate my guts, all scowling and trying to look tough. That prick from the infirmary is still following me too, doing that thing that men do to try to make themselves look bigger than they are by puffing up his chest and holding his arms out. A generic looking white guy in his forties with black hair, looks like he's getting a little doughier than he'd like to admit, and gives me the impression he's the top agent. He thinks he looks tough, but he couldn't take me. All twenty of them mobbing me at once, though, _that_ would be a different story.

"I thought they were with you." She replies.

"I have _no_ _idea_ who they areâ€¦" I keep talking. I decide it's best to try and keep a natural conversation. I'm not exactly sure what might make my shadows descend on me, but I'll try to tread lightly. "So it looks like you Spartans are officially _a thing_ now, huh?"

"You bet."

I follow beside Commander Palmer as we walk down the metal hall. I have to admit, I'm a naturally tall guy, that's what makes my limbs as long as they are. I normally outpace people, but Palmer and I walk side by side. We're about the same height, too.

"So, what does it take to be a Spartan?" I ask sarcastically. I have to admit to myself, I'm being a bit of an ass.

"You have to be the best of the best. Then they take you and make you better. If you're going to be one of us, you've got your work cut out for you. I can tell you that right now."

"You haven't seen my record."

"What? Feeling inadequate already?" She challenges.

"Yeah, there's that Spartan pride." I fire back. Bloody Spartans, they always think they're better than us ODSTs. I used to close myself in a metal coffin and crash into planets for a living. "Glad to know we can always count on you Spartans to blow your own horns. I feel safer already."

She doesn't dignify that with a response. We keep walking in silence for a while, past dozens and dozens of crew members, like a busy sidewalk. Damn, it really is like a city. It's almost perplexing why they made the hallways so damn big and tall, but I guess it was to make room for men's egos. Things always have to be big. Always always always. Size definitely matters. Everything has to be big.

"So, hang on a minute... If you Spartan-Fours are serious about this... Does that mean you have augmentations?" I ask curiously.

"Yep. And if you're gonna be a Spartan, you're gonna have to go through the implantation process."

"What? You think I need them?" I ask, looking down at my chest.

"All Spartans-Fours have enhancements. If it makes you better, you take what you can get." She says.

"Yeah, well, you don't have to worry about me."

"I'm sorry, I forgot to mention that this is non-negotiable." She states. "If you're going to be a Spartan, you're going to need augmentations."

"I already have augmentations. I've been around for a long time, you know."

"Oh yeah? Like what?" She asks.

"Well, I had laser eye surgery a while ago. That's gotta count for something, right?"

"Is that all?"

"No." I stop and impatiently turn to face her on my right, as she stops as well. Our followers keep their distance as we let the constant traffic pass us by. "I've got a cybernetic implant in my left hip. Right in the socket. It works so good I forget I even have it."

I point to my side. "The left side of my ribcage is replaced with metal replicates; the other side has reinforced metal plating, all titanium. I've got a pacemaker and a whole bunch of other small machines in my chest I either can't tell you about, or I don't understand myself. It's not that I need them, they just help"

I raise my curled left arm, and point to my elbow. "I've got a cybernetic implant in this elbow, and this shoulder." I say, pointing to my right shoulder. I've also got something in my back and neck, between the shoulder blades, along the spine, but I never really understood it too well. Apparently it's for all the rocks and

shocks I've taken over the years; combat drops, rough rides in warthogs, just a lot of strain I've been put through in general. I don't pay much attention to the parts of me that are synthetic. I may be enhanced, but I'm still me. I suppose I'm lucky I haven't been crippled, or had my good looks ruined by now. I've taken quite a beating over the years.

I lift my left foot, and grab my ankle. "I lost my left Achilles tendon to a claymore. Thank god it was defective, or I'd have lost the whole foot. They gave me a synthetic implant as a replacement, but luckily they kept it all under the skin. You can't even tell I had surgery."

Speaking of scars, I straighten up and hold the left side of my face with my right hand, and turn my head to show her the scar on the left side of my jaw. "I have a titanium bar in my jaw. They put it there when I broke the mandible. It's still in there. I think it's kind of holding my jaw together."

I sigh and shrug very innocently before I continue. "And then there's all the stims I took, and stuff they did to my organs that I'm not allowed to tell you about. Not to mention the lobotomy. _Christ_." I roll my eyes and trail off.

"_Anything else_?" Palmer asks, looking very unimpressed.

"I don't know. I don't have a very good memory." I admit. I know full well I'm omitting some things, some of which I either don't remember, or I just don't want to talk about.

"This is important if you're going to be a Spartan." She tells me, sensing that I'm holding out on her. "So think."

"Tell you what, I'll have my people give your people the list. How about that?"

"Fine by me." She says.

"Okay, but I'll tell you right now, it's a pretty long list."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, you would not believe the time I have trying to go through airports." I laugh. I'm rudely interrupted by that prick from the medbay, when he walks up behind me and not so gently shoves me from behind. I regain my balance, but I feel my temper flare a little. He has no idea who he's dealing with. "Keep it moving." He orders me.

We start walking again. Palmer's expression hasn't changed this whole time. She either doesn't care about me and ONI, or she just hates me.

"I don't think he likes me very much." I whisper.

"Must be your winning personality." She replies.

I follow Commander Palmer down a few turns where the corridor thins out to a more reasonable size. She pulls out her mobile when we get to a digital sign that proudly boasts "OFFICER'S BLOCK" from the

ceiling in big golden letters. There's not much traffic around here. My shadows don't follow us.

"So, since you apparently have some sort of rank, your quarters will be here." She tells me, flatly. "Typically, Spartans don't keep their rank."

"Oh yeah? What's the ranking system for the Spartan program?" I ask curiously.

"As a Spartan, your rank is Spartan."

"If you keep throwing that word around, it's gonna lose all meaning." I warn her jokingly. I read about that on my datapad, how apparently just being a Spartan is the absolute apex of human existence. What a load of bullshit. I'd take being an ODST over a faceless oversized wind up toy soldier any day. But apparently what I want doesn't matter. She doesn't reply, but focuses on her data pad.

We come to a stop outside a locked door. Palmer holds her hand flat against the digital scanner to the left. The door opens and she ushers me in. "This is your room. Your prints have been enrolled." She hands me a digital device the size of a playing card with a bunch of numbers on it. "Here's the key to your office."

Inside the room is something I didn't expect. It's a typical naval quarters, which is to say it's a little lack-luster. A rectangular room, the walls, deck and ceiling are the same metal-grey color. Soul-sucking would be a good way to describe it. It would be completely devoid of color if it weren't for the army green on the bed and closet. The bed is a single sized rickety metal skeleton with metal springs stabbing through the foam mattress. To the left there's a small bathroom, sectioned off by the metal walls, clean, but too small. I find an electric shaver on the counter. Along the unbroken left wall is a small kitchenette with a stove, a sink, a dishwasher, and a mini fridge. A couple of cabinets hang above the kitchen counter, though there aren't any plates, and the fridge is empty. There's no washing machine or clothes dryer, either. Christ, what a bachelor pad.

"What?" Palmer asks, noticing me walking around the room like an unhappy cat.

"It's a little barebones." I comment. I'll have to redecorate it later. It'll be just fabulous, I'm sure.

"This is what you get with Spartan privileges." She states.

"Well Spartan isn't the word I'd use." I inform her. "The Spartans didn't sleep in beds."

"Is that so?" She still sounds disinterested.

"Yeah. That's something about the Spartans that everyone likes to conveniently forget. That they were elitist, egotistical psychopaths, who put more emphasis on being a man than trying to be a human being."

"Oh really?" She says, challenging. "You think the Spartans are elitist?"

"You know what they did? Every Spartan male was inspected from birth by their village elders, to see if they were worth the time to train. And you know what they did if the child was sick? Throw 'em off a cliff. It's nice to see the Spartan program wants to continue the tradition."

"The best of the best." She reiterates.

"_I_ was born sick." I point to myself. "The Spartan-Two program, the one you're trying to be, judged people off of their genes."

Palmer crosses her arms. "The Spartan program judges people by their skill and experience. If you think you're not confident, you can resign."

"I wouldn't be that lucky." I mutter, and make for the door. I stop mid-stride when something on the bed catches my eye. I turn and pace towards it with interest. It looks like a small, black rectangular box next to the pillow. I grab it and hold it up to my face to read the gold lettering on the cover.

"What is it?" Palmer asks.

"A bad joke." I mutter, disappointed. It's a Bible. I was hoping it would be my sidearm but yet again, I am let down. I find the cold steel of a gun more comforting than a bible. I toss it back on the bed and leave, closing and locking the door behind us.

Back out in the halls, we begin walking again. Palmer shoots me an inquisitive look. "You know about the Spartan-Two program?" She asks me.

"The giant faceless _things_ that go around the battlefield, kicking everything over? Yeah, I was with ONI at the time. I knew all about it." I tell her. I half expect her to jump me for being a soulless goon, but she doesn't.

"How old are you?"

"Wow." I joke. "That's a bit rude."

"Seriously, you look like you're thirty. How the hell could you have been around that long?" She sounds like she's accusing me of lying. "The Spartan program has been around since before we met the Covenant. Shouldn't you be at least fifty or something?"

"Well I'm flattered." I joke. "But if I told you my real age, you wouldn't believe me."

"Try me." She challenges. I'm a bit frustrated, but I don't stop walking.

"Well, it depends on what you mean by _age_." I tell her. "People tell me I look like I'm about twenty nine. Biologically, they tell me I'm about thirty years. If you're only counting the time I spent _out_ of cryo, I'm thirty two. But you want to know my real age?" _And here's the kicker_. "I'm over a hundred."

She doesn't believe me. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. All that time I spent in cryo as part of my job. Hell, even before that, when I was a kid."

She still looks like she doesn't believe me. "Sure."

"Can we not talk about it?" I ask politely. I never want to talk about this. I may look younger than I am, and I can take a compliment, but I wasn't lying. Palmer will probably write off my knowledge of the Spartan-II program as a special privilege for being ONI. I'm fine with that, but my own age isn't something I carry lightly. I don't think of myself as someone who's actually over 100, obviously. I think of my unique situation like something I can't remember after spending a long time in a coma, or something like that. Like a lot of things happened, and I just wasn't around for it. I resolved to not let it change me a long time ago, and it still hasn't, but sometimes I just feel like a machine. It's not easy outliving most of my friends.

"Any family?" She asks.

"No. I'd outlive them all, anyways. No wife or kids, either. I'd outlive them too." I can tell from her expression that she didn't think I was much of a family man to start with. I look way too young for that anyways. I look like a bachelor. "Not like I had much of a choice, though. All that radiationâ€¦" I start to trail off, self-consciously. "Kind of ironic when you think about it. We were so worried about the Covenant wiping us out with their plasma weapons. Never thought about all the radiation those things gave off. I know a lot of marines with the same problemâ€¦ Aw, who caresâ€¦? Where are we going now?" I ask, eager to change the subject.

"Science wing." She answers. "Come on, I'll introduce you to someone important."

Palmer keeps walking, and I follow right beside her. We exit the officer's block back into the larger halls. Hoss and the ONI goons start following us after a while, but from farther away this time. They're doing a better job of trying to be discreet, but I have eyes in the back of my head. Someone in what looks like a golf cart drives past us on the left, probably necessary for getting around if this ship really is as big as they say it is. Christ. I might not want to admit it, but all the walking reminds me I'm not as fit as I used to be.

Eventually, we get to another deck where the hallway thins out, and the ONI shadows disappear again. The metal walls, deck, and ceiling look like they're a different metal, more like polished silver or chrome than steel and brass, like it is everywhere else. The place is almost an icy blue from the bright lights installed in the ceiling, like those really annoying headlights some cars have. There's no one around, the halls are completely empty, creating a very eerie effect. I'm about to ask where we are, when I notice a digital sign on the ceiling that says "INFINITY SCIENCE." We take a left, then a right, and then a bunch of other turns I don't bother memorizing, until we come to a polished sign on the wall that says "Physics Department."

"I'll introduce you to Doctor Glassman. He's our lead expert on slipspace physics. He's also a bit clumsy, so don't hand him any

sharp or pointy objects."

"Glassman, huh? That's some name."

At the end of the long hallway I find myself in, there's a daunting set of black padded double doors. They slide open when we get to them, Palmer taking the lead, into a large circular room. I step into what looks like some kind of lab, there's all sorts of computers and screens with readouts scrolling across them, and a whole bunch of other machines with functions I don't have the IQ to guess. It's like a forest of metal and plastic machines, with what looks like a giant fluid tank in the center. If Palmer wasn't here for me to follow, I'd probably get lost.

"Doctor Glassman, we have a visitor." Palmer announces to the room. Her voice carries.

The only other person in the room looks up from their station cluttered with small metal bits, paper, sketches, diagrams, blueprints, and a whole lot more paperwork. From the side I can see it's a man. He straightens up from his workstation, dinging himself on the back of his head on a work light that clamps onto the side of his desk.

"Ohâ€¦ Hello there." He says softly, reflexively rubbing the back of his head.

He looks to be in his fifties, with light brown hair that's losing some of its color, going grey around his temples. Hell, he looks older than I do. He's got some lines and creases on his face, around his eyes and on his forehead. He doesn't look too old though, so there's not that much grey. Just from the first looks of him, he looks like someone who got into a lot of trouble when they were a kid. He wears a lab coat, and either some thick rimmed glasses, or prescription goggles. He's got a band-aid on his left temple.

"Doctor Glassman, this is our new member, Micky. Micky, Doctor Henry Glassman, Ph.D." Palmer introduces me. She's probably heard that my last name is somewhat of a trigger word for me. The doc just goes with it. She gestures with an open hand.

"Hey there, doc." I shake his hand. His grip is weak.

"Hello." He says, before he turns to Palmer. "Another Spartan?"

"That's the plan."

"Oh, that's good. We'll need all the Spartans we can get if we're going to Requiem."

"Uh yeah, that reminds me." I voice something that's been puzzling me. "What exactly is the purpose of going to this Forerunner world? What are we doing?"

"Research," Glassman answers, "Requiem is full of Forerunner technology I just can't wait to discover. As advanced as we are, what we find could propel our technology decades, even _centuries_ into the future. I'm quite looking forward to what you Spartans bring back

from your missions."

"What good is Forerunner technology to us, doctor?" I ask, though I'm not about to forget that comment. Like anyone who's not a Spartan isn't good enough to hold a rifle anymore. I've done some recovery missions in my time, and sometimes we found what we later learned were Forerunner ruins. Of course, all those planets are glasses now, but before the Battle of Earth, we learned that the Forerunners refer to us humans as "Reclaimers." All I know is that apparently, when they all disappeared after they fired the halos, they intended for us to inherit all their stuff.

"Well for one thing, _Infinity_'s engines are Forerunner." He answers me.

"Really?" I turn to Palmer in surprise, but her expression is one of disinterest. We make eye contact, but she doesn't answer me. Instead, she lets Glassman take this one.

"Oh yes." He explains eagerly. "They're the most advanced we've ever seen, far more advanced than anything our top physicists could design. They're so good, in fact, you can't even feel the deck beneath your feet when we jump into slipspace."

"Oh really?" I got used to making jumps over the years. It wasn't fast or easy, but if I'm in a firefight when it happens, I don't skip a beat. I've known some people who get sick from it, like they feel like they're upside down, or they get dizzy, or stuff like that. Personally, I always got light-headed, like I stood up too fast. Once, I blacked out and almost cracked my skull open on the deck.

"Well, you can, but it should be nothing for a trained ODST." Palmer corrects him.

"Right. Well anyway, my job is to study whatever Forerunner artifacts or technology we recover on Requiem, and hopefully we'll learn some of their secrets."

Palmer nudges my arm to the right. "We'll talk about that later." She tells me quietly. I don't think Dr. Glassman hears her.

"Right, anyways, what kind of science are we talking about here, doc? Physics? I'd hate to disappoint you doctor, but I'm kinda dumb." I confess. "I'm into biology, though. That's kinda cool, I guess."

"Oh, no, no I'm not a biologist." He says innocently. "But bring me back a Forerunner artifact, and I can teach you all about it." Somewhere in his eyes, I see him looking down on me. Not literally, I'm about half a foot taller than he is, but he looks at me differently, an imperceptible spark in his eyes. Deep in there, there's a small flicker, there always is. Because he knows he's smarter than me. Scientists.

"We'll talk about that too." Palmer interjects, before shifting her posture and separating me from Glassman. "Anyways, thanks doc, we'll catch you later."

"Excellent, I look forward to working with you."

Palmer ushers me out of the room, and the doors close behind us. Walking again, I just keep following her, turning where she turns. I don't know where we're going next, but I wish I had one of those golf carts. Before I have a chance to ask Palmer, she turns to me and gives me a funny look.

"You're _'kinda dumb?_'_ What's that supposed to mean?" She almost laughs.

"Hey, I know I'm not the smartest, but at least I don't try to _act_ smarter than I am. Not like some people. I may not be the brightest, but I'm not _incompetent_. I'm smart enough to know how stupid I am. But I'm good at my job, and I know what matters."

"Good." She approves.

"And it's not that I don't like science. I think science is pretty cool. I love biology. It's guys like _that_ I don't like."

"Who, Glassman?"

"Yeah, that guyâ€¦" I grumble. "I know his type. Guy thinks he's a genius. They all do. They're always so fucking smug when they get to educate a dumbass like me, the didactic jerks."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. _Eggheads_."

"They all think they're experts, they all think they're the smartest. If I'd choked down all the pills the _experts_ told me to, I'd have overdosed four times over. Honestly, there's only two reasons why people become doctors, and contributing to society isn't either of them. It's because they have a desperate pathological need to prove they're smarter than everyone around them. That, or to impress girls."

That actually coaxes a laugh out of Palmer. Not much, but a laugh none the less. "Sure, Micky, I get you." She says, grinning.

"So, wait, I don't get it. What kind of ship is this? Is this a warship or a research vessel?" I ask. That's something that's been bothering me for a while now. I've known a few UNSC ships that had labs on them, resident doctors and physicists too. But I never focused much on that. Of course, I'd sometimes volunteered to hang out around with the science-types, see what I could learn, maybe educate myself on something interesting. But of course, I was just too stupid to even try to do that, and I shouldn't have wasted the experts' valuable time. What with all the important tenure checks they were busy collecting for doing fucking _nothing_.

"_Infinity_ is a little bit of both." Palmer informs me. "She was commissioned during the war, supposed to be the largest warship ever constructed, but they only finished the project _after_ the war ended. You were still on ice at the time. Now, our job is to provide military escorts for the eggheads to whatever shiny Forerunner places they want to see. We have the resources of an entire city at our disposal, so there's not much we can't do."

"Alright, where are we going now?"

"You'll see."

"Well, wherever it is, can we please take a golf cart? Or a taxi, or something? If this ship is seriously as big as a city, how are we supposed to get from place to place?" I ask. She doesn't reply, but I get the feeling I'm about to find out.

In the halls, we take turn after turn through the science wing, still as bright and icy blue as before. It's a long walk, most of which I zone out for, but eventually we come to a set of stairs. It looks like a subway station from the inside. I see a platform at the bottom, not a soul in sight, not even Hoss. What seems like an empty subway car waits for us on some kind of tracks, like a really big tin can on wheels. This must be _Infinity_'s transit system.

"Oh, I seeâ€¦ that's pretty neat." I blurt out loud, before turning to Commander Palmer. "Oh, so, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"What's that?"

"The whole thing about the Covenant." I say to her, as we both enter the shuttle, and she enters something into a keypad next to the doors. "We beat them, right?"

"Were you even listening to Captain Lasky?" She asks impatiently.

"Yeah, but the thing with the Halos, the Forerunners, are they still going on about that? They're still motivated by their religion?"

"Well, not all of them. But the ones we're fighting now are still a bit overzealous about things. They believe Requiem is the home of one of their gods." She takes a seat next to the doors, and I sit across from her. The inside of this thing looks a lot like the metro.

"Oh yeah, right." I laugh and point a finger. "Remember what they used to call it? Their '_Great Journey_', remember that?"

"Yeah, I remember." She grins. "They're occupying Requiem for now, trying to dig up whatever relics they think are important. I guess that's the thing you've gotta love about the hinge-heads: predictable as clockwork."

The smile on my face quickly vanishes. "Okay, you said it again. I was gonna let it slide, but not anymore. What's the deal?"

"What?" She asks, her smile gone as well. She looks at me funny.

"_Hinge-head_. What's the deal?"

"That's what we call them."

"No it's not."

"Well, what do you call them?" She asks as if I'm crazy.

"_Split-lip!_" I demand. "We have _always_ called them split-lips!" She just shrugs her shoulders, as if that's _not_ suspicious at all. Christ, I must have been away for a _long_ time. "If Spartan candidates are get picked from , what were you before you were a Spartan?" I ask.

"I used to be an Orbital Drop Shock Trooper, just like you." She answers.

"Wow. Some Helljumper you must have been." I say sarcastically. I don't believe her, and she can tell.

"It's true. I got picked because I did my job exceptionally well. Lots of ODSs like you are Spartans now."

"I can guarantee you've never seen anyone like _me_." I think saying that made me throw up in my mouth a little.

"Sure." She says, as the shuttle comes to a stop. Palmer stands up, and I take her left side as the doors automatically hiss open.

"Ladies first." I wave a hand before the door.

"Age before beauty, old man." She mimics me.

"I don't look that old."

"Yeah, right."

Wherever we are, it looks like all the other oversized halls I've seen so far, but Palmer seems to treat this one differently, with a sort of respect I haven't seen. Her posture changes as we walk. She picks up the pace a little, getting a few paces ahead of me.

"Last stop: S-deck." She announces, holding out an open hand. I can tell she's very proud of this part. "This is the central hub for all Spartans onboard _Infinity_, and _your_ new home away from home."

"Yeah, we'll see about that." I mutter. Hoss is following behind me now, and a couple other agents. I ignore them for now, and pay attention to Commander Palmer's speech.

"Infirmary, armor-bay, mess hall, personal quarters, training courses, everything you'll ever need while onboard _Infinity_. S-deck keeps three hundred Spartans ready to deploy around the clock."

"That's a little heavy-handed, don't you think?" I stab at her. I have no idea why people have the fascination with trying to be worthy of the original Spartan-Twos, like there's something so special just about the title. _It's just a word_. I've been an ODS for years, and I never wanted to be a Spartan. She doesn't reply, but she leads me to a part of the hall where there's a very, _very_ large observational window. From the deck to the ceiling, she stops in front of it and gestures. On the other sideâ€¦

"Holyâ€¦" I blurt, the words don't even get far.

"That's the armor bay." I hear her to my right, though her voice sounds oddly distant. All I can do is stare, hypnotized. It's a lot to take in at once.

A massive room lies on the other side of the glass, bigger than a hanger. The ceiling must be five stories high _at least_; you could fly a pelican through there. Absolutely stunning, even if things seem to be unnecessarily super-sized around here, this place is a real feat of engineering. Very clean and polished, there are a few crews of techs in scrubs milling around on the floor below. They look like ants from up here, and we're not even at the ceiling. Along the length of the bay, a long walk with what must be armor-fitting rigs takes up both sides, and another level above the main floor, a third one on the right side.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Palmer asks rhetorically.

"Yeah," I reply, still stunned, unable to look away, "_welcome to the thunderdome_."

I'm interrupted briefly by another voice from down the hall. "Commander Palmer, a word please?" I turn to my right, and see Hoss and the two ONI agents waiting impatiently, down the hall. I don't know what they'd want with her, I look to Commander Palmer for an answer, but she just shrugs and walks off.

Returning my gaze to the window, I watch for something, any hint of how the way things might work in this place. Someone who I guess is a Spartan-Four comes along on the top level, wearing what must be the under-suit, kind of like Commander Palmer's. The Spartan stops, turns to his left, and walks down the lane towards the rig at the end, where a team of half a dozen technicians wait for him. It looks like a torture device, or like one of the gyroscopes my grandfather gave to me as a kid, over a lifetime ago. The Spartan plants his feet in a pair of armored boots at the bottom, and grabs the handles at 2 and 10 o'clock, clamps armor onto the forearms, and then the machine clamps on the leg armor. Next, the rig lifts and pivots the Spartan on an angle, and the chest plate clamps on, followed by the shoulder pads. After that, the rig levels the Spartan, the Spartan steps out of the rig, grabs his helmet, and walks away.

All under 60 seconds.

"Wow, that sure is something." I say out loud. I turn to face Commander Palmer on my right. She looks like she _really_ fucking hates me.

"What?"

"Move."

"Excuse me?"

"Tour's over, move."

I blame Hoss. "Hey, what's the big deal?" I demand, impatiently marching over to the three agents. "What's the problem?"

"You heard the lady. Move it." Hoss replies flatly. God, what an asshole.

"I don't take orders from you." I snap back, pointing an angry finger. Bad move. The agent on the left, a pouting, scowling tough girl in a black operator's cap, immediately pulls a humbler from her holster and thumbs it on. The sound of buzzing, crackling electricity is enough to get me motivated. I get the feeling she'd like to take me down with her little fly zapper, I don't doubt she would, since I'm not in armor. I turn about-face and get walk at a rather brisk pace.

"That's it, tour's over." Palmer tells me. "Your assignment starts now."

"What starts now? You haven't told me, no one's told me what's going on! What am I doing here?" I demand, frustrated. I hate this, I hate not knowing. Things have really changed since I've been away. First there's a new generation of Spartans running around, who obviously think they're better than me, and we're fighting the covenant over some new forerunner planet we've just discovered. I remember when the Forerunners were just a myth, just a spot on the map ONI wanted me to recon. On top of it all, ONI is breathing down my neck, got me on a leash, and they're tightening the noose. Things used to be different. I used to outrank everyone on this boat. Now I'm getting tasered, and taking orders from someone I don't even know.

"Your new assignment is to assemble a team of Spartans-fours and lead them through the Requiem campaign. You've been relocated to Infinity for the duration, and your rank has been noted." Palmer tells me, walking again. "However, you will answer to me and Captain Lasky as long as you're here. I'll be your commanding officer, I lead your missions from the ops center, but it's your job to pick your Spartans and lead them in the field."

"That's fine by me."

"Captain Lasky and I will give you a list of candidates to choose from. Ultimately the decision who to accept and who to deny is in your hands, but CINCONI trusts your judgment."

"And you don't?" I can tell from her tone.

"What I think doesn't matter." She replies, resentfully.

"Hey, I'm a vet, I know what I'm doing."

"Sure you do."

"You may not know it this, but I was on Reach, and Harvest." I set the record straight. "You Spartans think you're something special? I'll show you what a real ODST is made of."

"Sure you will."

We eventually come to an incline leading up to set of titanic doors. I'm a pretty tall guy, but these things are massive, way taller than they need to be. There's a lot of loud noises coming from behind them, it sounds like machinery; engineering work, welding, cutting and grinding metal, someone hammering on something really loud. On the other side of the open door, we come to the top

of a balcony that looks over a massive open area that must be one of _Infinity_'s hangars. The place is huge, with plenty of warthogs and forklifts hauling cargo around on the deck. I notice the powerful luminous blue glow of Earth's oceans through the open bay door. I was an Earth kid, so it's nice to be home. While I'm taking in the many sights and sounds of the massive hangar from the top of the admin walk, my eyes glide over something I have to take a second look over.

"What the hell is _that _thing?" I ask, pointing.

"That's a pelican." Palmer replies, as if I'm the stupidest man in the world.

"Since when did pelicans look like _that_?" I know I'm not crazy. They've changed the look of pelicans now. The cockpit looks smaller, narrower, and the windshield is different, sort of bulging. Christ, it looks fucking stupid. How much can possibly change in only 4 fucking years?

Ignoring me, Palmer continues, arms akimbo. "You have twenty-four hours to get whatever it is you need to get done, if you want to head down to the planet."

"And how am I going to do that? I don't suppose you have any spare SOEIVs lying around, do you?" That would be great, actually.

"We're in orbit right now, currently getting restocked and resupplied before we head back to Requiem. There are plenty of shuttles heading to and from the surface. You should be able to hitch a ride easily enough."

"Actually, I have the perfect candidates in mind already." I can't help myself but smile, and I start heading down the ramp, towards one of the shuttles unloading its cargo at the top of a landing platform

"So where are you going?" Palmer shouts down from the top of the ramp. I turn around to answer her and walk backwards. I feel a mischievous grin crawl across my face.

"To dig up some graves!"

* * *

><p>Hello again! And no I'm not dead, I was just really, really busy.

So after a while I decided it was about time I put some new chapters up. I'd like to genuinely thank everyone for reading so far, I even have some fans. As always, please rate, comment, ask questions, and of course feel free to point out any spelling or mistakes I've otherwise made. I'm sorry, I know it's no excuse for a writer, but I don't have an editor to work with me, although I do find mistakes sometimes. And be sure to read the author's note in the next chapter.

Hong Kong is lovely this time of year. The vibrant sun begins to set below the horizon, melting the waterfront into beautiful liquid gold and red. The thin clouds in the distance look as if they've elegantly caught on fire, bright orange and yellow. A flock of seagulls flies overhead, a sailboat in the distance slowly drifts across from left to right with all the time in the world. The scene looks like a painting.

In the park on the edge of the water, I look around myself at the crowd of young tourists and sightseers that's gathered to admire the view. They all look like college kids, no one here looks older than 30. Throughout the park, in groups or couples, they do what people their age do, smiling, laughing, taking pictures. A young couple on the park bench next to me rest on each other's shoulders, gazing into the sunset. They look so happy, so peaceful, so young and full of hope.

That's a good word to describe the feeling around here these days: Hope.

A shining example of what people are looking for after nearly 30 years of fighting a losing war. The feeling around the airport was one of general optimism. Tourists walk the streets in abundance, up and down the Tsim Sha Tsui Promenade, and all throughout downtown as well. Hong Kong is one of the top destinations in the industry, with an economy that's on the rise. Easy to tell from all the tourists here on vacation, or their break from school. They call this place "The Pearl in the Crown," and it certainly lives up to that.

Post-war Hong Kong is doing quite well for itself, four years after the fighting stopped. There are not only one but two generations now, that can't remember a time when we haven't been at war with the Covenant. Now, without the constant threat of conscription or extinction, the citizens of the UNSC can finally look forward to a lifetime of peace and serenity. Why shouldn't they? They're young, they have their whole lives ahead of them. For them the war is over.

But I know I'm on the outside looking in. I know I can never join them. People like me don't get to enjoy a peaceful civilian life. I know that for me, the fighting will never stop. It's all I do, it's all I've ever done, it's all I know how to do. Hell, I'm just fine with that. After a while I stop gazing into the distance and leave the park on foot. As nice as it may be to stare at the sun, I'm here on business. I start making my way downtown as the sun gets lower and lower on the horizon.

This place got off lucky. When the Covenant landed on Earth, they didn't glass the city, it was mostly East Africa and Australia that got it. No orbital bombardments, no invasions, no killteams in the streets, and the space elevator was left intact. It's a load off my mind, since I own property here; an expensive condo in central.

Of course, Hong Kong has known the threat of invasion before. Countless times before, this island has almost been swallowed whole by the neighboring red giant. China has threatened to annex this place more times than I can remember from history class, along with all the neighboring small countries they were used to getting tax money from. Of course, the United Earth Government eventually put an

end to all that, not that anyone would have done jack shit if China actually did invade. Dare and the world yields.

As the sky begins to darken, I make my way through downtown, in the shadows of the towering buildings all around me. The crowds of tourists on the streets begin to thin out, as people make their way back to wherever it is they're staying. They either plan on staying in, or are getting ready for tonight. The nightlife in Hong Kong is pretty much how people imagine it, mostly under 30, looking for a rave or a nightclub. This place being the vacation destination that it is, there are plenty of those places around. But I'm looking for something else.

As night arrives, Hong Kong transforms into the glowing neon paradise that most people imagine it is. Traffic picks up again, as the usual suspects come out to party, emerging from their hotels or taxis, wearing the latest fashion that I don't understand. Time and age don't apply to me, I've long given up on trying to keep up with fashion trends. Hell, I don't even dress normally; black combat boots instead of normal shoes, and black combat pants too. My belt carries an empty sidearm holster on my right hip, and an occupied knife holster on my left. I'd be wearing a vest too, but a black T-shirt with my dog tags on is all I could get away with. Not enough to cover up my ODST tattoo of a flaming skull on my right bicep. The bright signs and variety of lights all over downtown bleach my skin a hideous array of neon colors.

I look like the average gweilo, but I'm actually a halfie. I'm Chinese on my father's side. Hell, my last name is Wong, and that's just about the most Chinese name there is. To most people I look like I'm white, but a few of my friends can tell. I don't speak much Cantonese, everyone in my family only spoke Mandarin anyways, but at least I know how to swear. I've also got a tattoo on my left wrist that a few ODSTs I know also have. It either means serpent or dragon, depending on who you ask about it.

Taking another left, I finally spot the place I'm looking for at the end of the block. A sophisticated Asian-inspired bar with a lounge on the top floor, high enough to see the waterfront from the balcony, with a polished marble and jade exterior. Above the entrance, the gold Chinese characters proudly read; "Jade Dragon, bar and night lounge," in broken, bastardized Chinese. I know the owner, I told him to fix that fucking sign. It doesn't matter though, people can never get enough pseudo-Asian stuff, it's been that way for the past 600 years. Doesn't matter if the sign's wrong, probably nobody's reading it.

On the outside, it looks like an average, classy nightclub. Just some place for Joe tourist to lose some money betting on slots or digital poker, while he kills some brain cells over a few drinks. It is a legitimate business after all. On the inside, though, it's a different story. The people who visit this place while on vacation here have no idea about the kind of danger they're in. Not that we'd ever let them know. We're not stupid.

The truth is, this place is a front for our operatives while they're on leave, or waiting for their next deployment. Along with the twin hotel owned by the same guy, this place is the perfect cover for laundering money, and helping our people disappear when they need to. I'm sure a lot of people disappear inside the walls, but every time a

body ends up in the harbor, the locals blame it on the triads.

ONI worries about what would happen if the truth about the Spartan-II program ever went public. But the truth is, our battle record is much worse, much more damaging, and much harder to swallow. The truth is, if the public ever heard about the things we did, it would be too much. Most people think they've seen it all, that they can handle almost anything, but this is it. This is the limit. If ONI ever let the truth about us get out, they'd have a riot on their hands.

The things we did are war crimes. I won't deny it.

Because the truth is that we're government sanctioned psychopaths, trained to kill, turned into living, breathing weapons, and unleashed on civilians at ONI's word. Brutality for brutality's sake and because we thought it was fun. When they took the collar off, we did our worst, and we got paid to do it.

Psychopaths. Sociopaths. Serial killers. Rapists, murderers, sadists, sex offenders, it's all there. The worst of the worst, the dregs of society. We couldn't live in a civilized world like the UNSC, so they chose to do something useful with us. Collected from Earth and across the colonies, we were selected for our very worst character traits. Some were already in the military, some were taken from civilian populations, some from prisons and asylums, even sanitariums. Of course, we weren't all crazy, I've known some of us that have gotten in on their skill alone.

I'm not the worst, not by a long shot. I never raped anybody. I never skinned anybody. I never decapitated or crucified or cannibalized anybody. But I was still chosen, because I was still a killer.

The French have a word for what I used to be: gamin. If Parangosky hadn't found me when she did, I honestly don't know what would have happened to me.

The training program was grueling. Over 18 months of the best ONI could buy; retired agents, active ones, veteran ODSTs, and all sorts of Special Forces types, educating us in all kinds of ways to excel at killing people. Not the most solid plan, putting all those unstable characters together in the same place and turning us into dangerous killers. We took hundreds of side casualties in the beginning. Almost every day I'd see a body lying face down in the dirt, or under the steps to the barracks, or out in the open, face down in the mud while no one ever stopped or paid any attention to the corpse, all of them wearing the same charcoal black recruit uniform we always wore. The weak ones didn't last very long in there. But those of us who passed became the most vicious, ruthless, brutally effective killers ONI has ever seen.

Most of us that are left these days can pass for normal. The veterans, the ones sharp enough to last the longest, are some of the most dangerous operatives that have ever served in the UNSC. My friends, the officers in the ranks, have some pretty decent heads on their shoulders. The oldest of us are about as dangerous as they come. We were the best of the best. The most dangerous soldiers in the UNSC came out of our outfit.

We don't have an official name for ourselves. ONI kept us off the grid and under the radar, so that whatever we did was as deniable as possible. Very few people knew about our existence back then, and even fewer now. Most of us think of ourselves as ODSs, we make drops in SOEs all the time, that was our main role when we were up against the Covenant. We usually refer to ourselves by generic titles: Ghosts, reapers, prowlers, lurkers, that sort of stuff. It's pretty cliché, but nothing's a cliché when it's happening to you. Besides, it sure beats what the civvies called us: rapists and murderers.

And of course, I'm the leader of it all. We don't have any official ranks, but I've been in the program since the beginning. I've been around the longest, and I was there to lead this outfit when no one else was. Last time I checked, I think I'm the equivalent of a Colonel. Then again, no one here's ever cared much about rank; the ops here have no need for leadership, that's just something civvies think everyone in the world needs because they've never known people as strong on their own as we are. Those are just the character traits that make people stronger, let them rise above the rest, no need to follow anyone else because they're not blind, and they're not anti-social either, just the best there is. I don't need anyone to lead me, none of us do, but for some reason even I don't understand, I'm the shot-caller. I've never cared much for rank myself, I just do my job, and I prefer to lead from the field, not from behind a desk. Maybe that's the reason they looked to me when they needed someone to lead them, and not some over-educated nerdy jerkoff straight out of officer-school. I'm experienced, I've proven to be more than capable, and I'm our oldest surviving member.

Of course, I think they chose me for a different reason. I could be cruel, savage, and bloodthirsty when I needed to, and a lot worse. I won't deny it. At times, I might have been the worst out of all of us. But I also have a conscience. I knew what I was doing when I did it, and I know it now. The levels of self-criticism never ever end. I think that's why they trusted me. I kept us grounded, kept us sober when we would have just run rampant.

There's not that many of us left. Not anymore.

Under the grammatically incorrect sign, I push through the gold-handled glass double doors, and into the bar. It's a nice place, lit by calming, dark purple ambient lights, cylindrical crystal bulbs on the dark columns and dividers, and pyramidal chandeliers that look like some sort of sculptures. A large aquarium takes up most of the far wall, with an elevated stage above it, playing a smooth jazz track where a live band would normally be playing, led to by dark, curving stairs on either side. This place has the setting of a nightclub, but the relaxed, stress-free, comfortable feeling of a lounge. A very long bar and with an extensive collection of spirits behind it are the first thing on the right, after the entrance. A wide, circular sitting area of dark tables, chairs and lounge couches takes up almost the entire left side, in a depression a few steps down. Along the length of the left wall, the floor raises again, where expensive booths line the far side, under crystal lamps that look kind of like the Sydney Opera House.

The well dressed bouncer instinctively stops me at the door. A tall, bald black man dressed in a wine red, five hundred dollar tailored sports blazer. He's built like a wardrobe, broad shoulders, a large

muscular build, and rugged good looks. He's a pretty handsome guy, even after his fair share of broken noses. He stops when he recognizes me, a friendly smile already spreading over his face. His posture quickly changes, and he extends a hand for me to shake.

"Micky!"

"Rorke." I shake his hand, smiling myself.

"Good to see you again, man!" He cheers ecstatically. His smile keeps on getting bigger and bigger.

"Likewise."

Paul "Blitz" Rorke, one of the best. Determined, resilient, and well trained, he's been around for a long, long time. Not quite as long as me, but almost. He can be a real nice guy, but when he's in the field with his shotgun in his hands— Well, I almost felt sorry for those innies. I've seen him run through jackals and elites like they were nothing. He's got the skills, the reflexes, and the dedication it takes to make it in our line of work. I'm not exactly sure what was wrong with him that landed him here with the rest of us. Maybe it was his rage, or maybe it was his killer instinct, but whatever it was, it made him one of the best. Last time I checked, he had his own squad.

"So what brings you back, Mick?" He asks, he knows me so well by now that he calls me "Mick." That's just the way it is. "Last I heard, you were on ice."

"I've got a job. I'm here to talk to the owner."

"Ah, well, you'll know where to find him." He grins and lets me pass. I walk on, and turn to him on my way past the entrance.

"Be ready, I'm getting a team together." I say while walking backwards. He grins and nods, before returning to his post.

One way to look at our order of rank is in generations, since our recruiting process is kind of bonkers. We take the most dangerous jobs, the ones no one else could hope to pull off, the ones that would be suicide for anyone else. Missions that need to be done fast, right, and with our type of brutal efficiency and lethality. We're professionals, we get the job done, but at a cost, so we need new recruits every now and then, chosen for the same traits and reasons as the originals. Last time I checked there are seven generations, with the first, _mine_, being the originals around since the start of the project, and the seventh being our newest. Of course, there are always exceptions.

Once I'm in, I immediately find who I'm looking for. There, perched on a seat at the bar, hunched over his laptop and a fruity drink with an umbrella in it, is the owner. He wears a black leather jacket, a blue dress shirt and dark jeans, and dress shoes. Tommy Wu, a young guy with a civilian haircut. He's a halfie like me, but he's also part Korean. He looks like a civvie, but he's one of us, a survivor from one of the previous generations. He's not quite a veteran, really only sub-par, but we keep him around for his usefulness. He's smart, smarter than me, more of a computer hacker than a soldier,

really. He would have been less than worthless to us in the field, but someone had to take care of the business side of things, and as long as he proves he can keep this place running smoothly, it might as well be him.

"Hey look everyone! Micky's back!" He announces to the room when he sees me coming. A round of applause comes from some of the patrons, dressed in all black, so I know they must be our people. The civilians don't know what all the fuss at the bar is about, so they don't pay much attention to the new guy coming in and making all the noise. The façade works so well we're practically invisible in public.

In the darkly lit purple background, I see shadows in black uniforms shift and move around, standing up from their tables and their friends, and look my way, their faces covered by shadows. They must be my friends, the vets, but they know I'm here for a reason. They know I'm here on business, so they'll wait until I'm done talking with Tommy, and I come to them. We're a very polite bunch of psychopaths.

Most of the Ghosts that I can see at the front are young, very young, not old enough to know me personally. They're probably the new generation, they've probably only ever heard stories about me from their officers. Officers who will be retelling those stories now. He's that guy. He's the one I told you about.

"Tommy, I see you're still breathing. That's a relief." I poke at him on my way to a seat on his left. I shake a few hands with some old characters I know, but I'm here to talk business with Tommy.

"Missed you too." He says sarcastically.

"I bet you did." I reply flatly. There's not much that can make me smile anymore.

"How'd you know where to find me?" Tommy asks.

"You're always at the bar."

"How'd you know I hadn't sold the place?"

"That stupid sign," I state flatly, and point a thumb behind my back as I pull up a chair on Tommy's left, "a new owner would've had it fixed."

I get a laugh out of him. "It's been, what, four years?"

"Sure has."

"You've been out of the game for too long, old man."

"Christ, don't I know it." I groan. "I mean, have you seen what the pelicans look like these days? Jesus. Ugly fucking birds. I'm gone for a few years, and look what happens."

The pretty boy bartender comes over to take my order. He's an averagely handsome guy, but I don't recognize him. He must be one of us, though; Tommy only hires people from our outfit, what with all the brutal secrets we have to keep. I'm sure there's a dead body

strung up in the back somewhere. But the bartender doesn't look like a soldier. No scars or permanent marks that I can see, no uniform, no tattoos, just a black UNSC T-shirt and dog tags. Of course, most men who wear dog tags haven't actually been in the military, the pretentious twats.

"What can I get you?" The bartender asks, smiling innocently.

"Oh I don't know, something with alcohol in it." I snap back at him with hostility.

"You haven't changed a bit." Tommy laughs, before turning to the bartender. "He'll have what I'm having," He says, very seriously, and points a finger at me, "and he drinks for free, got it?" The bartender nods and slinks off to the side with his head lowered.

"That's very generous of you, Tommy, but you know I have money." I selflessly remind him. What with all the murdering and war crimes I've committed in the name of ONI over the years, I've got plenty of money saved up from over the years. I'm one of ONI's most valuable assets; I know that for a fact. Leader of the most vicious, brutal, and ruthless shock trooper outfits the UNSC has ever denied existed. That does come with some privileges, of course. I'm basically rich. I own property all over the word, and even on some other worlds too. Of course, all those planets are glassed nowâ€¦

"Hey, it's the least we can do for our boss." Tommy assures me, and slaps me on the back. "So what brings you here, Micky? You were on ice for four years. Must take something big to bring you back, huh?"

"Yeah," I mumble, "times have changed. New birds, new fight, a new Spartan programâ€¦ I'm feeling pretty old."

"You are old."

"Fuck you."

"Aww, come on." He shrugs innocently. The bartender returns with my drink; it smells intoxicatingly sweet and fruity, an obnoxiously colorful vacation drink, mostly yellow and orange, a maraschino cherry at the bottom. After a sip I think it's supposed to be mango. I'd have to drink a hundred of these if I wanted to get drunk, there's almost no alcohol.

Mulling over my drink, I sigh deeply. "Things have changed."

"Yeahâ€¦" Tommy replies, deep in thought. "Yeah they have."

"They've got me on that new rig they built." I tell him. My voice never rises louder than a stressed murmur. "Infinity. Ever heard of it?"

"They've got you on the Infinity?" Tommy asks, surprised. "When did that happen? I've been asking to get people on that thing for months, but the office always said no. How'd you get on it?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because I'm the boss?" I snap

sarcastically. I'm about to tell him something else, when I'm interrupted by one of the civvies suddenly taking the empty seat next to me.

"Hey there." She opens with, smiling. Caucasian female, brunette, mid twenties, wearing a skimpy pink dress, probably a student. I smile politely, but I ignore her. She's got a glass of her own, another obnoxious, toxic, fizzy drink.

"_Heyâ€¦_" She coos persistently, still trying to get my attention. Tommy is still going on, so I quickly signal for him to stop. I can't fucking stand it when too many people are talking to me at once, it drives me _fucking crazy_. In the field it's not that big of a problem, I can handle radio chatter, screaming, but at a time like this it drives me fucking _bonkers_.

"Hey." I answer deadpan. Most men in my line of work are terrible, shameful womanizers, but not me. But not me. I don't like anyone.

"_I bet you could get us into the VIP sectionâ€¦_" She tries to speak in her lowest, most seductive tone possible. It's alright, but it's falling short of moving me. I'm just a cold, loveless bastard. She tries leaning closer and puts a hand on my knee, a very tempting look on her face in the dim light, staring straight into my eyes. I must look very unimpressed, because she draws back a little, trying to look mysterious. Her colorful, armless dress reveals her fair, if not a little pale, skin. I can see she has tattoos on her upper arms, her shoulders, and her back, all pseudo-Asian stuff. A koi on her back, lines of Chinese script on her left arm that I can't read, and a large character on her right shoulder.

"_I like your inkâ€¦_" She comments when she notices that I'm a helljumper. She's easy on the eyes, but I'm not interested. Most men in our line of work are disgraceful womanizers with a libido that won't quit, but I'm different.

"Uh, yeah, I like yours too." I tell her, absentmindedly. I don't actually, but I'm not about to correct the big one on her shoulder, because it _clearly_ doesn't mean what she thinks it means. I turn from her, back to Tommy, and back to her, not quite sure what I'm supposed to do. I can't think of anything to say that would make her leave, either. Tommy is getting a free show.

"_Aww, come on, big guy, let's go to the balcony and watch the sunset. Maybe we could rent a room togetherâ€¦_"

"Sorry." I finally cut her off, and hold up the back of my scarred left hand to show her the silver band on my ring finger. It helps to wear it at times like these. "Already taken." I lie.

I finally return my attention back to Tommy. After that, she doesn't say another word. I don't look back, but I can tell she's leaving.

"You still keep it? After all these years?" Tommy asks.

"Yeahâ€¦ I don't think I could ever get rid of it." I admit, looking down sentimentally at the old ring. It hasn't lost its shine. It's ironic, the finger it's on is a fake. I lost the last section of my

end finger, and two sections of my ring finger years ago in a crash. I was in the driver's seat when our warthog rolled. When I came to again, I realized I'd already lost my digits, severed under the steering wheel. Those parts of my fingers are synthetic now, all of it kept under the skin after surgery. They look and feel absolutely normal, exactly the same as how I was born. No one can tell if they don't already know, hell, most of the time even I forget. I can even grow the nails.

We don't say anything for a long time. I just silently hang my head, and drink until there's nothing left. I ask for another, but something different, something stronger this time. With the bartender gone, and Tommy now lost in silent reflection, I feel very much alone.

"Four years," I groan, still not over it yet, "have you seen how much has changed?"

"Yeah, I know. I've been here." He says, heavily. He doesn't look up. "We're not what we used to be."

"I know." I tell him. We used to be the best of the best. Before there were Spartans, before there was MJOLNIR, before there was the 30 year war with the Covenant, we were the best there was. I, personally, used to be ONI's number one agent. No doubt about it, anyone they sent me after was as good as dead. Admiral Parangosky used to think of me as her own personal angel of death, I heard that myself, and quite honestly, I liked it. We were dependable, we were professional, we were the best there was. Now we're a raggedy bunch of aging helljumpers, going from job to job.

I'm feeling pretty down, not quite depressed, but I've been better. When my drink comes, some obnoxious green fizzy stuff, I gladly start downing it ASAP. I don't know what it is, but least it's strong. I have a suspicion it might be watered down absinthe. After all these years, I don't care what I'm drinking, just as long as I can get drunk.

Christ, I've become my mother.

"Anyways," Tommy says, shaking off whatever's been keeping him down, "you were telling me about your time on Infinity."

"Yeah" You said you've heard about it before?" I ask, curiously.

"Oh sure, boss, everybody's heard about Infinity. Biggest ship there's ever been, as big as a city, or so they say. That's where they got all those new Spartans on. I can't believe you got on it!"

"Yeah." I murmur, zoning out again. I can't help but think of everything I saw of S-deck. New Spartans, new technology, really impressive. I know we could never be replaced, but. It kind of feels like I am.

"Hey Micky, did we used to know a Zane?" Tommy asks unexpectedly, out of the blue.

"Who?"

"Ilsa Zane. Sound familiar?" He repeats.

"Uhâ€¦ No, doesn't ring any bells. Sorry." I answer, a bit confused. I don't have the greatest memory to be honest, but I'm pretty certain I've never known any "Zane."

"Yeah, thought not." He concludes, satisfied.

"Why?"

"I'll tell you later. Anyways, about _Infinity_, tell me about that. What's the story?"

"Yeah, they've got me stationed there, working for some pushover named _Lasky_. He wasn't a player in the game before. They've got quite a cast of characters on _Infinity_, that fucking thingâ€¦ Hey, think you could run some names for me?" I ask. We're ONI, it's our job to know everything there is to know about everything important. "See if you can dig up some dirt on them? I've got a list."

"Sure thing boss," Tommy replies happily. If there's anyone I trust with the intelligence work, it would be him. He's the educated one, and he's got a crew of the most talented, thorough and reliable intelligence analysts in the office. "We can help. So I guess you're not too happy about being on _Infinity_, huh?"

"No. I'm not." I admit.

"What's wrong?"

"I almost died when I got thawed out today." I tell him plainly. I don't actually know what day it is, but I don't care. I stopped worrying about what day was after spending more time in cryo than any normal human being ever should, became part of my job on a regular basis. "Never happened to me before."

"Really? You were _dying_?"

"Yeah, bleeding from my eyes. Felt like had another lobotomy." I inform him very factually. I nonchalantly sip my green drink as if it's nothing to worry about. When there's nothing left but ice, I ask for something different.

"That's funny." Tommy says, with narrowed brows, and a puzzled look on his face. "Because you were supposed to get thawed out along with everyone else for the-

"New Phoenix incident." I finish his sentence for him. "Yeah, I heard they brought everyone back for that."

As ONI's most loyal, dependable and brutally devoted enforcer corps, we're called upon in the UNSC's times of greatest need. They needed us for the war with the Covenant, so we were there. On Admiral Parangosky's word, the whole unit could be activated in only the most desperate, urgent situations. It's only ever happened twice: New Mombasa, and the New Phoenix Incident. I _personally_ made a combat drop into New Mombasa in 2552 because Admiral Parangosky asked me to. But this time, though, this time something was different. Like I said, things have changed, and anyone as stubborn as I am _hates_

change, and the new management we have now.

"Yeah, on CINCONI's orders." Tommy grumbles, and his posture worsens.

"Admiral Osman?" I ask, a name we're all familiar with. "You mean her?"

"Yeah." He says. "After she took over, well, things haven't been too good."

"I know," I tell him reassuring, "I got a new assignment on _Infinity_. It's all about that new Spartan program... Which reminds me why I came to talk to you- I had a meeting with Admiral Osman today, you know, about the whole dying thing, and she gave me my next assignment. Oh we had a _very_ informative conversation."

From the look on my face, Tommy can tell I don't have any _good_ news for him. I pinch my next drink that's arrived between my trigger finger and my thumb and lift it off the counter. A short, wide glass filled with oversized chunks of crystal ice and sparkling green liquid, it must be some kind of green apple thing. Not bad, but definitely a drink that belongs in a club like this.

"It went that well, huh?"

"Yeah. It went so well it's driven me to alcoholism."

He laughs. I can always make him laugh. "I'm sure you've got quite a story to tell, Mickyâ€| Care to share it with the rest of us?"

I drink from the straw in the corner of my mouth, pushed to one side by the grin that's unexpectedly twisted on my face. A small, contained laugh on my tongue catches me off-guard.

"Buy me a drink first."

* * *

><p>My flight landed on the pad some time during the day, though when exactly I didn't know. I felt the deck lurch and shake beneath my boots as the wheels touched down, and the pelican's frame settled on the landing gear. The angry whirring of the engines died down from a howling roar, to more of a droning whistle, and the ramp lowered. I sat relaxed in my black uniform, I felt at home in the bay of a pelican after all these years.

Bravo-6, ONI headquarters in Sydney. A real fortress, dark, monolithic blast walls tower over the surroundings. The defenses are practically impenetrable, manned here and there by skeptic, paranoid gunmen with itchy trigger fingers. I remember a time when I didn't need to show any ID card to get past security, I could just walk through the front, no questions asked. Of course, I have to now.

I made my way through the lobby, eyed by security from all directions. I let them stare as much as they wanted; someone who's been around as long as I have doesn't care. I've been around way longer than anyone in the building. I walked in like I owned the place. I didn't strut, of course, that's not my style, but I was confident. Most people who ended up in Bravo-6 had been _summoned_ by

powers greater than themselves, and it always showed on their face, nervous, worried, on edge. But not me, I was as familiar with this building as I was with a pelican. I said hello to old George when I passed by Washington Crosses the Delaware, the painting they've had up for as long as I can remember.

I already knew where to go. I blew past the receptionist without a second thought, through the door, and down the hall. After I passed security, I had a clear shot at where I was going next.

The thing about ONI facilities is that they're mostly underground. I didn't take the VIP elevator, I prefer to use my own two feet. Not like there's much choice at Bravo-6, though. A long, sloping ramp, a barely noticeable decline, made up most of the corridor I found myself in. A long, silent walk, kilometers even, just one long tunnel lit only by the dull lights overhead, paced evenly like streetlamps. The whole thing reminded me of The Andromeda Strain, or the ancient Diefenbunker from centuries ago. A normal person wouldn't have noticed, but I already knew the long walk was actually an illusion, meant to help people forget they're kilometers underground.

Shock absorbing structural integrity, EMP shielding, and more than three kilometers of solid rock in all directions. This was the safest place on Earth, and for good reason. Someone very important lives there.

After an eternity on foot, the lights on the ceiling and the sides of the corridor dimmed, and I was in the home stretch. At the end, I saw the set of closed door I've passed through a million times before, guarded by two black uniforms. Likely veteran ODSTs, they both held suppressed M-7s, lowered but ready. Each one undoubtedly held a cold bullet sleeping dormant in its nest, ready for anyone who so much as twitched the wrong way. One wrong move, and they'd cut me down in a heartbeat. No questions, no hesitation, no regret, just a dead agent and a bloody mess to clean up. The two guards at the door looked normal enough, though, not like the crazies I've seen posted there before. The guy on the right though, he was something else.

I know a gangster when I see one. People sometimes tell me I look like a triad, what with all the scars I have on my face. This guy, though, he definitely looked like a Mafioso. He had a massive scar on his jaw, something like a "Glasgow smile," almost impossible to miss. We made eye contact, I with him. He wasn't bad looking, but I could already tell he didn't like being looked at. He eyed me with contempt.

I smiled faintly. When he saw my scars, the checkmark shaped one on the left side of my jaw, we both knew there was nothing to talk about. I know some people are very self-conscious about their scars, the way it changes how you look, but I always thought they added character. One of the reasons I didn't trust Commander Palmer when I saw her. No scars.

I breezed by the two, a simple smile and a nod as I passed by, though the door and into the room. Old room. A room I've spent years in. Of course, it hadn't changed much after all these years. A dim overhead light above the large desk filled the room with a comfortable tone, and a fake "window" to my right cast a bright, sterile light through the drawn shades. I've seen it before; they use it to trick people into believing they're above ground, maybe on a high floor in a

skyscraper, not buried underground. Through the half-drawn shades, I saw Sydney's skyline, the forest of building, the harbor, and the opera house. It always seemed to be in this office. Not much had changed around these parts, even after all these years. Except for the lady in the chair. She was new.

"Serin." I called her by her first name. She'd been expecting me. "I hear you're an Admiral now. I remember when you were this tall." I said, and passive-aggressively held a hand next to my holster, empty of the sidearm that had it had been denied. It sounded strange saying that. Hell, she looked older than I did.

Admiral Serin Osman, personal understudy and protégé to the former head of the Office of Naval Intelligence, Margaret Parangosky, I'd learned about her passing on my flight over. Now, with Big Maggie gone, Osman was the one trusted with me and my services. But not just me, my friends too.

"Micky," she smiled, "good to see you're ready for duty." She was a nice person if you knew her, but there was just something about way she spoke. Her voice had a sort of icy, calculated cadence to it. Like she was half con artist, half serial killer.

I shifted on my feet in front of her desk, crossed my arms. "So it's official, huh? Old lady Parangosky kicked the bucket, and you're in charge now?" I always thought of Admiral Parangosky as a friend, not someone to be feared, like everyone else. Which is not to say I didn't respect her, I just didn't think she was terrifying.

"Looks that way."

"And I hear one-one-seven's dead too. Is that true?" I asked, harsh and cruel. It was no secret I wasn't too fond of the Spartans. She didn't give me an answer, but I assumed the master chief was dead anyways.

I knew Serin had been a Spartan-II once, one of the program's many dropouts. She was forced to quit when Dr. Halsey's bullshit surgeries almost killed her. She's still a Spartan though, trained with the best of them. They were a tight group, the Spartans, brothers and sisters. But the Master Chief was always the favorite son.

My tone didn't betray my opinion, though. I held no love for the Spartans. I didn't admire them, or look up to them, or dream of being them. I had no illusions. I'd often looked around myself as every marine in the corps gazed longingly into 117's golden visor. I have no idea why, but they all seemed to worship him for some reason. He was everyone's favorite, the special one, special to Halsey, special to all the other Spartans. I never understood why. It was no secret the only reason he excelled was because he was the luckiest, even Halsey knew that. I'm a soldier, a professional, a veteran ODS. I've been doing this job for years, and I never needed no damn Spartans to get my job done for me. If you're a soldier, and you rely on luck of all things, you have no fucking business holding a rifle.

"Oh, that's just too bad." I mocked, condescendingly. The guy didn't even have a fucking face, and he was the poster boy. I never understood why they wanted to replace us ODSs. We're the ones who actually have faces. But then again, I guess that's exactly the problem. "So, Osman, want to know how I've been lately?"

"Oh I'm sure you'll tell me." She replied. Her voice kept a sort of reserved detachment to it, hidden behind a wolf's smile. There was always something about the way she looked, the way she spoke, like she was dying to tell me I'd been poisoned.

"I got thawed out today, as per your orders, woke up on Infinity. I got your assignment, and I've been dodging your hatchet men ever since."

"And you came here just to talk to me?"

"I woke up this morning and started bleeding from my eyes. That's never happened before. You got something you want to tell me?" I demanded impatiently. I know I've been paranoid before, but I suspected Osman had tried to kill me in my sleep. Everyone Admiral Parangosky wanted ghosted; I ghosted them, reliably and efficiently for years. ONI's most valuable asset, I was indispensable because I was the best, and the leader of ONI's ghosts. But after Osman was put in charge, she'd have been given access to our battle records. What's in there is enough to make anyone want to kill me and erase me from the universe.

The things I did ages ago make the stuff Osman's done look like a party.

"I'm sure it will pass." She assured me. "You're not as young as you used to be, you know. And you've been away for far too long."

"And now you've brought me back to work for you on Infinity?" Even then, I knew I sounded like a jerk. "You think you can control the ghosts? You're playing with fire, Osman. You can't be serious."

"Believe me, I am quite serious, and you should be too."

"And now you've got me working for those jokers? We both know I shouldn't be working under them. And I sure as hell don't plan on being a Spartan."

Osman pivoted in her chair and crossed her arms. She gave me this look that just said: Oh really? Why?

"The Spartan program is over-rated." I said, dead serious, poised with my hands defiantly on my hips. "It was back then, and it is now. But everyone throws the word around like it holds the weight of the entire human race."

"You'll think differently when you're a Spartan."

"You're not making me a Spartan." I protested. "You of all people should know that."

"You should be grateful, Micky. You've been given a chance to continue a proud UNSC tradition." She said, passive-aggressively. I could tell she didn't like me. I played a part of the SPARTAN-II program when I was working for Admiral Parangosky.

"Oh for crying out loud," I kept shifting on my feet, "all you Spartans think you had such a fucking terrible childhood. You should

have seen where I grew up." I know it sounds strange, I knew all about the Spartan-II program, but I still meant it.

I lost my parents when I was very young. I had to leave home. I grew up on the streets. I was an only child, and the only family I knew was dead and gone, and I couldn't rely on anyone but myself. Just me and my oversized steak knife that I took from our kitchen, just a kid, up against the world, even at night, even when I started losing my vision in the cruel, unforgiving night.

I was stuck in that god damn horrible part of life that no one ever considers: limbo. The way I lived, all I had to live on, it was my own personal hell. It was purgatory. Too little to live on, too much to die on.

So I guess I don't look up to the Spartans like everyone else. Because I learned a long time ago, in a dark, forgotten city alley, bloody, ragged, starving and alone: I could never depend on anyone but myself. I learned not to scream when I was scared. I learned that no one comes when you cry. I learned that when you need help, you need to help yourself. I never asked for help from anyone, I couldn't, I just had to keep myself breathing. Dodging the superintendent, a worthless myopic piece of shit, it was just as blind as I was. I was able to stay hidden in that city for over a year, living on my own.

Of course, then there was the orphanage. That fucking place was more like a corporate prison than a charity. Parangosky found me, she took me off the streets when I was 14, and I've been in the program ever since. I know for sure I was seen as one of the prototypes for the Spartan-II program, me and the other street kids.

Before anyone could say another word, I went blind. I completely lost my vision, or at least that's what I thought had happened. Everything just went dark, but not completely dark, though, more of a dark blue.

"That's no way to speak to a lady." A disembodied voice said seemingly out of nowhere. Male voice. The strange thing was that it didn't seem to come from anywhere, it was just there.

I took a step back. "What the fuck?" I said out loud, not exactly out of surprise, more like a frustrated curse. I dialed in on the object that had obstructed my vision, but it was hard to understand what it was. It took a while for my brain to understand what exactly it was I was looking at, like an optical illusion. A three dimensional object, a dark blue cube, seemed to hover motionlessly in the air directly in front of me at eye level. It had colour, but it seemed to have small, almost unnoticeable pixels on it's surface, like a holographic projection.

"You should show the Admiral a little more respect." Said the voice again, the same one I'd heard before. It seemed to be coming from the cube. "This far underground, you're exponentially more likely to disappear, or rather get disappeared. You've already saved us the trouble of burying you."

Osman seemed to catch on to my confusion. She casually waved a hand in front of the scene before her. "Micky, this is our friend BB." The avatar seemed to bounce and then spin in place at the mention of

its name, as if to say _"that's me,"_ in its own annoyingly cheerful way.

"What's that supposed to stand for? Blue-Box?"

"It's Black-Box, actually." The AI retorted. He sounded snappy.

Osman took that as her cue to speak up again, since she saw that I needed _someone_ to explain. She stood up from her desk and stepped to the side for a better line of sight, since BB had materialized directly in front of my face. "BB here doesn't believe in masquerading as something he's not, as I'm sure you can see. He prefers to reveal himself to us as what he really is: pure intelligence."

"A black box?" I asked, rhetorically. I'd sort of caught on by now, though I didn't have the heart to tell him that an aircraft's flight recorder isn't actually black, and that it's normally orange.

"Now you're getting it." The thing condescended from its avatar. "Look, Serin, he's learning!"

"That's the best you could come up with? A box?" I mocked the AI back. The passive-aggressive tension was so thick in the air it was as if I could feel it dripping from the walls.

"Faces are for wannabes." BB declared. Somewhere deep in his voice I heard pride.

So that's how it's going to be. I instantly stopped paying attention to the avatar in the room and turned to face the corner to my right, craning my neck up to look at the black sphere of a camera embedded in the ceiling there. I remembered AIs use cameras to see, that's where their real presence is, they only show their avatar to give us _meatbags_ something to focus on. This was the equivalent of me looking him in the eye. "Can't be too smart, I can wear black and you can't." I learned a long time ago I could usually freak out AIs like this. In truth, I could understand where BB was coming from. He had a strong sense of self identity, like me when it came to the Spartans.

Speaking of Kilo-5, I turned back to Osman in a heartbeat and started up a new discussion without breaking stride.

"So, Osman, word is you're the one who sold this "Jul 'Mdama" guy his weapons."

That took her by surprise. "How do you-" She began to ask, before I cut her off.

"We are the ghosts, Admiral Osman, it's my job to know." I stated, and put my hands on my hips like I often do. Osman may have been promoted to the head of ONI while I was frozen, but make no mistake; the ghosts have been the blood in ONI's veins for over a lifetime. We own every piece of intel that comes through this office. I was able to get myself caught up during the flight over, with help from Tommy's people. I may not have the talents that Tommy and his people have, I was a field agent instead, but I'd learned everything there is to know about Kilo-5's record: They supplied the elites with

weapons after the war to arm an uprising in their caste system, and keep their civil war going long enough for us to come in and give them the push they needed after they'd dug their own graves. _Because that always works; supplying the enemy with weapons. Yeah, that never goes wrong._

It was Osman's turn to get the _so that's how it's going to be_ look on her face. I knew I'd killed the chances at a friendly conversation before I ever set foot in Sydney. "Oh, I see."

"And that's what you've brought me back to do, is it? That's what you've got me on Infinity for, to kill this "Jul 'Mdma" character and his 'splinter' guys? It's not my job to clean up your mess, Serin." I said. Whether or not I sounded like a jerk, I wanted to put that out there.

"This is _not _a clean-up operation, Micky." Osman said, short. I heard she was beginning to get cross with me. "But if it helps, you can think of this is your chance to do some good for once, set the record straight."

"Jesus Christ, Osman, ever since Halsey, ever since you took over, you and the rest of those Kilo-Five losers became the fucking morality police!" I said, like a scornful old lady.

"And just who do you think has had to clean up your mess after everything you and the rest of those psychopaths that call yourselves '_the ghosts_' have done in ONI's name?" Osman snapped right back. Yeah, she was done. She made for her desk again, casually walking over to take a seat. Whether or not she had a gun there, I didn't know, but if she _did _she could have easily killed me, no doubt about it. "They call us 'organized crime in uniform' for a reason. Because of everything the people like _you _have done. You and the previous administration have had your turn to drive the Office of Naval Intelligence's name into the ground. And I'm not sorry to say I'll be putting an end to your rampant killing spree."

"Is that what this is, me on Infinity? What if I refuse?" I challenged.

"Are you aware of just how many people this office has ghosted, Micky?" There it was, the killer's voice again.

"You're goddamn right I am." I seethed. "Parangosky might have had a reputation for ghosting people, but _who _do you think it was who ghosted them?"

"Yes, Micky, you're a regular Keyser Sāze. In which case, you should know just what happens to soldiers who abandon their posts." Osman said, official again.

So, that's how it's going to be, was the loudest and clearest thought in my again. It just played on repeat over and over again as I weighed my options. I didn't have many.

"_Rules of engagement_" I asked, finally. I had run out of options until I had only one left. "I got your assignment, I just want to know the mission parameters."

"Like I said on file, you can have anyone you want for this

assignment, but the ghosts are absolutely off-limits. Understand?" Osman folded her arms and leaned back in her chair, back at home base again.

"And what's going to happen to the others?" I asked. I felt like I had to, but wish I hadn't.

That's when Osman dropped a bomb on me. "As of one week ago, the Office of Naval Intelligence's enforcer corps was ordered out of cryo stasis and brought to full standing force. The ghosts are once again at full strength and available for tasking."

It took a second for that to finally sink in, but it eventually hit home— Like a car crash. I was stunned. My heart might have clutched and come to skidding halt in my chest, but I was so taken off guard I couldn't even tell. I don't even know if those were her exact words, but they might have been something along those lines.

"W- Wait... You did _what_?!" I asked, eyes wide in shock.

"Yes, everyone's been thawed out, even you." Osman repeated, oblivious to the problem. "Now the ghosts are once again at full strength, although you'll be working on something else, obviously."

"Osman, you are way out of line here." I insisted, no longer focused on trying to have a pissing match with Osman or BB. I was more genuinely concerned with the situation at hand. Admiral Osman, the new head of ONI, had brought out every last killer we'd kept in cryo stasis for years. Anything short of the reckoning paled in comparison to the kind of hell I had just learned had been unleashed. We had some real fucking whackjobs in there. The average ghost is the most elite killer in the Corps, but the majority of the ones we were keeping on ice, the ones that had been around from the first generation, _my_ generation, are the absolutely most dangerous human beings alive. Unbreakable, unfazeable war veterans, and the most psychopathic stone-cold murderers this side of Valhalla. Not to mention a lot of ex girlfriends.

Something wicked this way comes—

"No, actually, I don't believe I am." Osman stated plainly, before the door opened behind me and the two guards entered, hefting their weapons lowered but ready. I didn't turn around, but I knew they were taking up positions to flank me, ready to raise their weapons and gun me down, cold. "Now, Micky, I believe you have some work to do."

The guards took a step toward me. Time to go, I had worn out my welcome a few dozen insults ago. I left without an argument, the guards each took one of my arms as I was turning to leave. I shrugged them off, and walked out on my own. Osman had the last word.

"Congratulations, Micky, now it's _your_ _turn_ to become a Spartan."

* * *

><p>Tommy listens as I tell him the whole story. He doesn't ask any questions or interrupt, he just listens as silently and as patiently

as I need him to be.<p>

"Wow." He finally says, as if he's so stunned he can't find the right words, but he's gonna try anyways. The bartender comes over to take away what I think was my fifth drink, but I lost count when I was telling Tommy about my Sydney encounter. Not that I've been drinking that much, I just didn't bother keeping score. I didn't even get drunk anyways.

"Soâ€| Big Maggie's really dead, huh?" Tommy asks almost apologetically. He keeps his shoulders hunched and his head hung low, looking at me sideways with a depressing expression. He looks disheartened, when he looks at me with a sideways glance I can see just how serious he is. He used to know Admiral Parangosky when she was alive. He looks like he's not completely sure he wants to know the truth.

"Looks like it." I give him my answer.

That's not what he wanted to hear. He gives a dry, stressed, small laugh; He'll shrug it off for now and let it hurt later. "You know, Harper bet a hundred credits they put Admiral Parangosky on ice in the basement somewhere. Is that true?"

Yeah, that would be Harper. I honestly have no idea if ONI's got Admiral Parangosky _Walt Disney'd_ in the basement somewhere, but it's not unthinkable. Most of us in The Ghosts are cryogenically preserved to elongate our lives in the service. Especially us from the first generation, we're valuable assets. They say they keep me around because I've got a rare talent, a killer instinct that's hard to find, they can't afford to have me wasting time living, aging. Up until recently I've spent near all my waking moments fighting and killing. I've gotten to be over a hundred this way, with the body of a 29 year old. So maybe Parangosky really is in cryogenic stasis, kept alive until we find a way to conquer death...

"No comment." I answer, like one of those clueless corporate suit-and-tie fuckwits when they're put on the spot in front of a camera. That makes him laugh a little, me too. But the laughter soon dies out, leaving us both in silence again. We stay like that for a while, not saying anything to one another. I'm comfortable with silence, but if I don't speak up, no one will.

"They want to make me a Spartan, Tommy."

"Yeah."

"They're going to. It's going to happen. The surgeries, the augmentations, they'll change me."

"I know." He reassures me.

"It'll change me forever." I drive. This is nothing new, we already had this discussions forever ago. We asked all the important questions before; with the Orion project. We talked all about the moral dilemmas we'd faced back then. If we were to permanently change someone, to turn them into something beyond a normal person, bend their body to the cause, and turn them into a war machine for our purpose... Don't we have a moral obligation to prepare them for that? If a person is willing to sacrifice themselves to the cause,

shouldn't we make sure they're prepared to spend their live the rest of their life as something different than what they were born? To never feel _normal _again?

They had fun with their little collective consciences with that one. I found it amusing watching all those directors on the board mull it over. As if they knew what they were talking about.

"Did you hear what that scumbag, Musa Zero-Nine-Six said about the Spartans?" Tommy mentions, bringing up another name I'm unfamiliar with.

"Who?"

"Musa-Ninety-Six" He repeats.

"Am I supposed to know who that is, too?" I ask rhetorically. "What, was he a Spartan?" I remember that the number 96 would be a Spartan-Two designation. He must be retired, I'd think they all are by now.

"Yeah," Tommy confirms, "did you hear what he said about the Spartans?"

"No, what's this guy done to get you so upset?" I ask rhetorically, mocking him.

"He said that it was _them _who saved humanity, that 'we would not be here were it not for Spartans.' He thinks we _need _them to save us." Tommy says, in massively exaggerated air quotes.

I shrug like I don't care. "Well, what do you expect? Guys like him and Osman, they've spent their whole lives as Spartans. It's all they've ever know, what else are they going to think? Can't blame them for that." I tell him very understandingly.

"Yeah, well did you hear what that bitch Halsey said about the Spartans?"

"No, what's she done this time?" I laugh. Oh that Doctor Halsey.

"She says that '_her' _Spartans are, '_humanity's next step, our destiny as a species_.'"

Okay, that actually pisses me off. Because Halsey makes it sound like what she did was evolution, and it's _not_. Evolution takes billions of years, all she did was abduct some kids and try to play God. As if anyone who's not a Spartan is just more fucking _evolved _than everyone else. Still, I'm not about to get too upset over it. I just shrug again, and sip my last round, the one I've been waiting for; a piña colada, the real vacation drink.

"So you're going to go through with it?" Tommy says. He sounds half unsure, but also like he knows beyond a doubt I'm gonna say no.

"Sure I am." I give him my answer. It's his turn to hear something shocking.

"What? Why?" He demands.

"Orders are orders, Tommy."

"You don't have to accept them this time, you know." He says.

"Well, this comes down from Osman, and she sits on the right hand of God. So yeah, I'm doing this." I say with finality. I'm not one of those "_do whatever it takes_" or "_finish the mission at all costs_" losers. I think it's fun to watch those guys die. I've never lived with that mindset, that's just what those guys tell themselves to make them believe that they've got something useful to live for. _Yeah, make yourself useful and stand in front of me_. Which is not to say I'm a deserter or a coward, I've put in more than enough years to earn the right to brain anyone who dares call me that, and it's not that I can't commit either, I don't give up easily, I'm probably the most stubborn sonuvabitch in the whole lot of us. I've just never seen any point in throwing my life away. Call it selfish, but I always thought that I could contribute more to the war effort if I'm actually _alive _to do it, and I'm still here.

"You could always resign," Tommy offers, "quit and find a new job."

"Yeah right, what am I gonna do?" I ask.

"You could always teach kung fu or something."

"I told, you I had a _Sensei_, not a _Shifu_."

"Yeah, whatever." Tommy says dismissively. I swear to God I'm going to hit him if he says _same thing_. I still remember my old Sensei; the only old man who would take me in, even before Parangosky did. Everything I learned about fighting, I owe to him. He didn't just teach me how to fight, he taught me how to survive. I got two of my tattoos back when I was his youngest student.

"You could be a pilot." Tommy offers.

"I'm too stupid to be a pilot." I say, truthfully. It's only after I've said it that I realize I shot that one down really fast. Tommy laughs it off and waves a hand as if to disagree, but we both know he's the smart one here.

"You could be a mercenary," he offers again, "work for the private sector. I bet that would be good for you, a lot of folks are switching over these days. You might end up escorting someone important."

"Mercenary just isn't my style." I say, although it's true I used to be a bodyguard. Parangosky was a close friend, I used to be her chauffeur and personal escort. She reassigned me after I shot a cab driver. After that I went on to intelligence gathering.

"I suppose doing paper work in an office is out of the question?" Tommy asks delicately, as if trying to not sound intrusive.

"Absolutely." I answer immediately. Boy, Tommy's really going through the list.

"Didn't you say you wanted to be a paramedic at some point?" He asks, and points a finger. "Maybe save some lives, be someone's hero?"

"Nah." I tell him. "That doesn't sound like any fun."

"Well think, Micky, there's gotta be something else you'd be good at." He insists.

"Aww, Tommy, you know that's not true." I try to dissuade him. I have no idea why Tommy wants to help me find a new job, but it's not going to work.

"Come on, haven't you ever thought about doing something else?" He asks.

"To be honest?... Not really." I tell him the truth. "I mean look at me, what else have I got besides this? Where am I gonna to go? What am I gonna do? This is all I do, this is all I've got, this is all I know how to do, this is all I've ever done."

"So you're not even curious? Why not?"

"Come on Tommy, I love my job. Think about it, I get paid to kill people." To tell the truth, I don't know what else I can do, or what else I could do if I wasn't doing this. This job is all I've ever known since I was a barely a teenager, for most of us this was the greatest opportunity we've ever had in our lives. We got benefits, a steady job, health insurance, dental, home, auto, life insurance, a retirement plan, everything I could ever need. For most of us, we got the help we needed, and I was eternally grateful. I pledged my life to Parangosky, and the service.

I've lived a long life, and I've done more than I could ever wish for. It's true that I've had many roles in my life, and I've done so much over the years. I've been a soldier, a murderer, a shock trooper, a combat medic, a war hero, a lifesaver, a specialist, a bodyguard, a spy, a field agent. Once, even a prizefighter. "I could never walk away from this."

"So you're gonna do the job?"

"Damn right."

We laugh and clink our glasses together. I may not know exactly what's in my future, but I do know that there will be fighting. I'm looking forward to it.

"You gonna need a piece?" Tommy asks as he looks down and notices my empty holster.

"No, I'll be fine." I answer honestly. It's only after I say that, that I realize that I do need help, or that I will need some time down the road. Osman said no drawing from the ghosts, and she is the boss, but I know there's a way to do this. "Gonna need some help, though."

Tommy doesn't look too sure about that. He looks like he's struggling to say something he doesn't want to say, and face something he

already knows. "We're not what we used to be."

"I know."

"There's not many of us left." He depressingly admits.

"_I know_."

Good people are hard to come by. Of course, we keep the fresh meat and the crazies too whacked out to tie their own bootlaces frozen in the basement, and we shamelessly use them as meat shields for our own purpose. But the experienced ones, the sharp ones, like my friends, are a finite resource. There was a time we used to deploy up to 30 taskforces when we were at full strength. But those days are over.

"We're losing people faster than the next generation's coming in." Tommy confesses as he looks as if he's going to be sick, and very, very disappointed. "New jobs keep coming in and our numbers keep getting thinner. And on top of that, we've got more and more agents going rogue every day."

Damn. Ghosts going rogue are a special brand of _Pandora's box_. Rogue elements from our unit would be more dangerous and deadly than imaginable, and definitely impossible to stop for anyone else but us. I've run the scenario through my head more than countless times before; killers break away and become splinters, chaos elements, uncontrollable and unpredictable, and always costly when it comes to deploying assets. It's not hard for me to imagine my brothers in arms hunting and gunning each other down, if just for the blood, but that's not as likely anymore. Now that we're under new management and not Admiral Parangosky, I'm sure the more agents dispatched to round up the rogues, the more rogues there will be. Cannibalistic, self-destructive behavior. Osman is trying to spend us all. She wants us gone.

But that's not going to happen.

"I know. And I'm sorry, Tommy, I really am. I wish I there was another way, but there isn't. I _need_ _this_ job. And I need your help."

He looks straight on and sits quietly, thinking. He doesn't say anything for a long, long time, longer than I'm comfortable with. If he's not talking then it's a bad sign, and I know he's smarter than me. Then, he finally says the words that get me off the edge. "Alright." He exhales. "I'll see what I can put together for you."

"Also, gonna need a tech crew."

"I can help you with that." He promises me. "Well, not me personally, but I can give you my guys."

I nod in agreement as a few people I know walk over to the bar. One of them rests his hand on my shoulder. "And boss, I get it if you're just playing along with Osman for now, but this whole becoming a Spartan thingâ€¦ Are you absolutely sure you want go along with this?"

I shrug. "They want to make me a Spartan? Fine." I ask rhetorically, and raise my piña colada up to my lips. I give him my final answer in a whisper very quietly, and very purposefully.

"I'll be the best fucking Spartan they're ever seen."

* * *

><p>And there we have it, another chapter done, and I'm afraid I have some bad news. This is the last chapter that's going to be published in what's probably going to be a long, long, time. I sincerely hate to do this, but I'm still writing and editing more of Crimson, which is going slowly but I want it to be perfect, so I promise to not give up on this one. I'm sorry, this was never supposed to take this long, if it had all gone according to plan I'd be done already, but there's no point in getting hung up on it now. Anyways, I'm just saying it might be a while, so for now...**

~Peace

End
file.